天地無用！魎皇鬼

天地様、ご乱心!?(上)

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト 大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

Tenchi-sama's gone mad!? (Part 1)

By Naoko Hasegawa

Novel 4

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
(March 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Chapter 1:

What is Peace...?

Peace. It is the warmth of the sun. Peace. It is a moment on a Sunday morning undisturbed by anyone. Peace... It is a narrow space surrounded by pillars, where Ryoko and Ayeka cannot enter. Ah, this moment of tranquility, worth more than anything else.

KA-BOOOOM!!

The sound of an explosion—or something like it—occurring downstairs made the glass in the bathroom window rattle violently. As Tenchi, who had been spending a private moment in the second-floor bathroom with a newspaper, involuntarily lifted his hips, he heard a high-pitched, shrill scream.

"What are you doing? That's dangerous!" "It's your fault for telling me about that weird dream!" "What is 'weird' about it? I was finally having a dream about Tenchi-sama, and for you to interrupt even inside a dream, you must have been peeking!" "I'm not a Satori! Why would I want to peek into your dream!?" "What's a Satori?" asked Sasami, who seemed to have become accustomed to the fights between the two—Ryoko and Ayeka.

Tenchi lowered his hips, which he had lifted momentarily, and sighed while folding the newspaper restlessly. This is the third time today. Tenchi muttered to himself, recalling the quiet Sundays of the Masaki household back when it was just him and his father—before it was occupied by aliens, monster women, Galaxy Police officers, and genius scientists.

I was still a first-year high school student, the house was in Okayama city, and Dad used to make breakfast on Sunday mornings...

That peaceful morning scene, which now seems like it was centuries ago, was projected clearly in Tenchi's mind. A father and son, eating breakfast calmly while watching TV without talking much about anything—a scene you could find

anywhere, yet for the current Tenchi, those are days of reminiscence that he can no longer hope for.

Ahhh...

A deep sigh leaked from Tenchi's mouth. The fights between Ryoko and Ayeka had become a daily occurrence in the Masaki house. They begin the moment the two see each other. The first time today was a competition over who used the washroom first. The second time was over breakfast side dishes, specifically the size difference of the rolled omelets. And this is the third time.

Tenchi imagined the members downstairs in the living room. First, the parties involved in the fight: Ryoko and Ayeka. As you know, the former space pirate who boasts monstrous strength—and who can also pass through walls and teleport—and the first princess of the traditional Juraian Royal Family, Masaki Ayeka Jurai. Then, her younger sister, Sasami-chan. The famous Galaxy Police detective, Mihoshi Kuramitsu, and her partner, Kiyone Makibi. The universe's greatest genius scientist, Washu. Or rather, Washu-chan. My father, Nobuyuki. My grandfather, who is also Ayeka's older brother and the head priest of the Masaki Shrine, Katsuhito. There are complex causal relationships here that span across time, space, and the stars, but let's set that aside.

Currently, in the Masaki house, located in a quiet mountain village in Okayama, seven family members were crammed together. Five of them were houseguests. Well, if you include Ryo-Ohki, it becomes five people and one creature. Kiyone and Katsuhito are technically excluded since they are at the neighboring Masaki Shrine, but, well, both of them show their faces at the Masaki house so often that the household is always in a state like a school field trip.

Just as Tenchi, feeling drained, stood up to put on his underwear, the insults from downstairs abruptly ceased. He had a bad feeling. Before he could even think, he heard someone banging violently on his bedroom door.

"Hey, Tenchi! Lend me your face for a second!" "Tenchi-sama! Please, listen to me for a moment!"

They teleported, didn't they...

Tenchi froze, his underwear halfway up. It had to be some kind of ridiculous errand. Tenchi, who had never encountered anything good in his life based on past experience, immediately thought so. He was sure he was about to be

bombarded with inescapable questions like: "How mean/sadistic/sneaky is this woman?" versus "How reckless/lewd/barbaric is that woman?" or "Between that sneaky, obsessed woman and that reckless, destructive demon (the only way he could describe them when listening to their claims), which one do you 'like' more?"

Then, the last bastion—the bathroom door—was pounded on violently.

"Tenchi! Hurry up and come out!"

That was Ryoko's voice. Tenchi knew the door was locked, but he reflexively finished putting on his underwear and grabbed his pants, only to flinch for a moment. His lower abdomen was aching sharply. Whether it was due to the mental stress or because he had given up halfway earlier, either way, he was not in a state to face anyone.

"Tenchi! We know you're in there. At least answer us!"

It was a rigorous interrogation, just like the Galaxy Police.

"Stop it, Ryoko-san. It’s pitiful for Tenchi-sama."

That was Ayeka’s voice. Just as Tenchi’s eyes welled up at her kind words, which felt like Buddha in hell, Ayeka continued.

"You should just wait quietly until Tenchi-sama comes out."

Cold sweat appeared on Tenchi’s forehead. The pain in his lower abdomen didn't seem like it would subside. He reached his limit. Tenchi lowered his pants slowly and sat down with the utmost caution.

I am not here. The person here is not the "Tenchi-sama" you are waiting for, but just an ordinary sixteen-year-old former high school student who just wants to quietly satisfy a physiological need. Please, stop waiting outside the door with your ears pressed against it, and go away.

Just as Tenchi began to pray in his heart, even though he knew it was futile, the angry voice of Ryoko, who had grown tired of waiting, rang out.

"Tenchi! Hurry up!!"

With her voice, a part of the door shattered into pieces. Ryoko sometimes forgets her own monstrous strength. Sometimes she forgets it intentionally, and sometimes she forgets it by accident, but in this case, it was likely an accident. On the other side of the large hole in the door was Tenchi's dazed, soul-shattered face. During this time, there was no dialogue. No sound effects. Ryoko's gaze was pulled by gravity down to Tenchi's lower body. Again, no sound effects. A hellish silence. A moment later, a scream from Ayeka that sounded like it would tear the Masaki house apart shook the surroundings, and everyone downstairs looked up at the ceiling reflexively.

Five minutes later, Tenchi appeared in the living room with a still-pale face. The group that had been crowded together in the living room fell silent the moment they saw Tenchi's face. It was because Tenchi's expression was not normal. Tenchi slowly looked around the living room. In the corner of the room, the edge of a striped dress could be seen from behind the sofa. On the opposite side, there was Ayeka, fiddling with her long hair.

"Ryoko."

Tenchi's stifled voice broke the silence. "What do you think you're doing?"

It was a bass voice that resonated in his gut, unlike the usual Tenchi. Ryoko stuck her face out timidly and stole a glance at Tenchi's face. *Oh, no...* Cold sweat ran down Ryoko's forehead. *That Tenchi... he's seriously angry.*

"U-um, listen. I'll take responsibility for fixing the bathroom door..."

Ryoko's words were cut off by Tenchi's cold glare.

"Tenchi-niichan, what happened?" "Well... I don't know the details either, but it seems Ryoko-san and Ayeka-san saw Tenchi-san's [CENSORED]... Eek!"

Kiyone pulled the hair of Mihoshi, who was whispering to Sasami.

"I didn't do it on purpose..." Ryoko started to say, but Tenchi remained silent. "What's [CENSORED]? Oh, you mean the censored part." Sasami, who was quick to catch on, nodded at Kiyone. Kiyone, who was blushing and couldn't bring herself to hit Sasami, hit Mihoshi instead.

"Ryoko, I..." Tenchi finally opened his mouth. "I’m seriously angry right now. Why do you chase people even into the bathroom!? And for such a trivial matter as fighting with Ayeka-san or whatever. I’m not your companion or your subordinate. And if I may add, I’m not your boyfriend or anything like that, either!"

"Tenchi!?" Ryoko’s eyes widened. "No way..."

Seeing the unusual state of things, Ayeka stuck her face out from behind the sofa. *Tenchi-sama definitely just said it. That he is nothing to Ryoko.* Her lips curled up involuntarily. Ayeka shouted in triumph within her heart. Just then, Tenchi turned around.

"Ayeka-san. What are you laughing at?"

His voice was grumpy. Ayeka immediately stopped laughing and peered at Tenchi’s face timidly.

"But Tenchi-sama..."

Ayeka flinched at Tenchi’s gaze and, seeking salvation, stole a glance at her nemesis, Ryoko. Ryoko was still stunned.

"I'm sorry. I tried to stop her, but Ryoko did that..."

Ayeka, who had started to speak, remembered the scene from earlier, turned bright red, and began speaking rapidly.

"In the first place, it’s Ryoko’s fault for peeking into people’s dreams. I was dreaming about Tenchi-sama. It was a dream where I was taking a walk with Tenchi-sama in the fields of the Juraian Royal palace. Then Ryoko came in that outrageous outfit and interfered with me and Tenchi-sama! And she said, 'You won't be alone with him even in a dream,' so I was just so frustrated..." "You're the one who appeared in my dream!" Ryoko shouted.

Her golden eyes narrowed, and she was trembling.

"I was exploring the shrine with Tenchi in my dream, and suddenly you appeared and cut in between me and Tenchi! You said, 'Oh-ho-ho-ho, I won't hand Tenchi-sama over to such a mountain monkey,' didn't you? You, the nerve of you to say that to others!" "Lies! That’s a lie!!" Ayeka shouted this time.

"Tenchi-sama, don't believe what a woman like that says. Besides, you snatched my rolled omelet this morning!" "You took Sasami-chan’s too, didn't you!"

Ryoko took a step toward Ayeka. Ayeka, not to be outdone, also took a step forward.

"You cut in front of people in the washroom, too! I was brushing my teeth. I was in trouble because I couldn't rinse my mouth since you suddenly cut in!" "It’s because you spend so much time brushing that it holds everyone else up!"

Ryoko and Ayeka faced each other, glaring, and the eyes of everyone in the living room were fixed on their battle.

"That’s why you're the kind of person who doesn't mind peeking at people or lying! You understand now, don't you, Tenchi-sama?" "Are you talking about passing through walls? I have that ability! What’s wrong with using it effectively!?" "See? You’re confessing it yourself. Didn't Tenchi-sama just say it? You aren't his girlfriend or anything! Since you're a monster anyway, why don't you just go back to the shrine?"

WHAM!

Suddenly, Ryoko’s slap flew through the air. The moment everyone in the living room gasped, Ryoko’s hand was on Ayeka’s throat.

"I'll kill you... You've made me seriously angry." "Big sister!" Sasami stood up in surprise. "S-suffocating..." Ayeka’s hands rose, fumbling to remove Ryoko’s fingers. "Hey, please stop!"

Mihoshi and Kiyone clung to Ryoko from both sides. In the moment Ryoko’s hand loosened slightly, Ayeka clenched her fist and struck Ryoko’s side.

"Urgh..."

It was the shock-fist technique, a secret of the Juraian Royal Family. The moment Ryoko buckled over, the next blow aimed for her temple. Ryoko reflexively teleported to dodge the blow, and then swiftly drew her Aura Blade.

"H-hey, Ryoko!"

Tenchi’s father, Nobuyuki, called out in a flustered voice. Katsuhito just stood there with his arms crossed, watching the two. Golden flames ignited in Ryoko’s eyes.

"Ayeka!! Today I will settle this... all of it!" "I welcome it!"

A cylindrical barrier appeared around Ayeka as she braced herself. Tenchi looked around the living room, feeling aghast. Washu and Katsuhito, for reasons unknown, were still sitting on the sofa, looking up at the two with cool faces. *To think they won't even step in to stop them...* Tenchi despaired. *Is it up to me to do something!?*

"Hyaaaaah!"

Ryoko’s Aura Blade swung down with a roar.

"Kyaaaah!"

Part of Ayeka’s barrier exploded and flew away. Ryoko was serious.

If things go on like this, it will rain blood, and the Masaki house might be destroyed. And all for a trivial reason like who peeked into whose dream.

"STOOOOOP!"

Tenchi instinctively tackled Ryoko. "I get it! I'm the one who’s leaving. You, put that sword away! And Ayeka-san, stop saying unnecessary things! Anyway, just get away from each other!!"

While panting, Tenchi blurted it all out in one breath. Ryoko, who was struggling to get up, froze in place. "What did you just say!?"

Behind her, Ayeka staggered. "What did you just say!?"

Tenchi stood up, looked between Ryoko—who was still slumped on the floor—and Ayeka, who was clasping her hands together, and then slowly repeated himself.

"I said I’m leaving. The reason there are fights is because I’m here. If I’m the cause, then if I disappear, peace will return to this house. Am I wrong?"

Both of them—no, not a single person present—offered any objection.

"Besides, why do we have to have a duel like this over a dream? Have you ever even once considered how much I endure on a regular basis? Because of you guys, I can't go to school, I can't go out to have fun, and I’m stuck hoeing the carrot fields. Carrots day after day! When I come home, I’m dragged into your fights, turned into a guinea pig for weird experiments, my room is a mess, and on rare Sundays, it rains blood from the morning on..."

As he ranted, the anger he had been forced to suppress earlier began to bubble up.

"I can’t even go to the bathroom in peace. Is this a human life!? I’m not saying this just because I was seen. That’s not it—it’s that I’ve reached my limit! They say even a saint loses his temper on the third time. In what world is there a high school student who spends every day in a hell like this? You think it’s here? I’m leaving, so you guys better think long and hard. Think about how much trouble you’ve caused those around you. I’m done with this!!"

"Tenchi-sama..."

Watching the stunned faces of everyone in the living room, led by Ryoko and Ayeka, Tenchi felt an indescribable sense of euphoria. *This is it. This is what I needed!* Saying what he wants to say and doing what he wants to do. It feels like a lie that he had lived a life of constant self-restraint until now.

"Anyway, I’m leaving this house!"

Declaring it like he was driving a nail home, Tenchi turned on his heel to exit while the aftertaste of his impact still lingered.

Where should I go? Tenchi thought excitedly. *A bicycle trip sounds good. I’ll pour all my savings into it—Hokkaido, Okinawa, anywhere I can be alone is fine. Just the thought of it is thrilling. People need a breather—no, a recharge—once in a while.*

Then, Ayeka’s whisper pierced his back. "Tenchi-sama has lost his mind... Ryoko-san, it’s your fault that Tenchi-sama has lost his mind!!" "Wh-what..."

When he turned around, Ryoko and Ayeka were staring at him with pale faces, clutching each other.

"Tenchi!" Nobuyuki called out in a panic. "Are you really running away from home!? Please, rethink this..."

If he rethinks it here, he'll just fall back into hell. Tenchi shook his head and tried to head up the stairs.

Then, out-of-place applause was heard. It was Katsuhito.

"Well said, Tenchi! It seems you've finally developed some awareness of being a prince. Go ahead and leave the house. I allow it. This house is too small for you now; you cannot complete your training here. You should go out and see the infinite universe! A successor to the Juraian Royal Family must go on a warrior's pilgrimage at least once. The universe is vast. Why, a year or two is nothing. I'll take responsibility for the carrot fields!"

"Grandpa!?"

Tenchi took his foot off the stair and clung to the handrail. "What are you talking about? I didn't mean to go that far..." "A man does not take back words he has spoken!" he was cut off sharply. "That said, you would be troubled wandering the universe aimlessly. So, while you're at it, could you stop by Planet Jurai and bring back some Water of Life? The Ryuo doesn't seem to be developing well."

"That's right, that's right," said Washu, who had been watching the events unfold calmly. "I mentioned it to Yosho-dono, but even with my scientific ability—the best in the universe—that Water of Life is the only thing I can't synthesize. For now, I'm giving it water with as similar a composition as possible, but I think it will take about another hundred years at this rate before it can be used as a ship core again. Well, there's no rush, though."

Washu added this with the ease of someone who has lived for 22,000 years.

"Planet Jurai... You want me to go all the way to Planet Jurai!?"

Tenchi's legs were genuinely beginning to shake.

"One thing leads to another. Tenchi, it's not like it's your first time in space," Katsuhito replied nonchalantly. "So, Ryoko, why don't you lend him Ryo-Ohki? Tenchi would be lonely without a travel companion, and Ryo-Ohki knows the way well." "Please take my guardian with you as well!" Ayeka rushed forward. Her eyes were strangely moist. "Tenchi-sama. I didn't know you had such a

resolve. Please forgive me for saying you had lost your mind!" "Tenchi!" Ryoko followed, as if she had come back to her senses. "So that’s it, you wanted to go on a journey... You surprised me by saying you were running away. Fine, use my Ryo-Ohki! I’ll go with you..."

SMACK.

After being slapped hard on the back of the head by Ayeka, Mihoshi, and Kiyone, Ryoko stumbled forward.

"It defeats the whole purpose if *you* go!"

As expected, Kiyone’s remark was calm.

"That’s how it is. Now, Tenchi. There’s no time like the present. Go prepare. Ladies, you should help him get ready." "Yes!" came the energetic response, sounding like a primary school classroom.

"Then, I’ll make a bento!" "In that case, I will write a letter to Father and Mother."

As Sasami ran to the kitchen with an apron in hand, Ayeka hurriedly started up the stairs.

"Mihoshi, hey, where’s the roadmap?" "Uh, let's see, Yukinojo should have it..." "We need the space navigation regulations too."

Mihoshi and Kiyone ran off to the subspace hangar outside, and Washu left, saying "Well then, I'm going back to my research," opening a lab door that appeared in space and disappearing.

"Hey, Father..." "It’s fine, it’s fine. Why don't we go pull some carrots first?"

Katsuhito pulled on the ear of Nobuyuki, who had started to say something, and they left through the front door.

"Oh, Tenchi. Wait a second."

Thinking of something, Ryoko’s figure disappeared, and soon Tenchi was left all alone.

"What do I do..." Tenchi, white as a sheet, muttered while clinging to the handrail. "What should I do..."

Tenchi slumped down at the bottom of the stairs and began counting the wood grain on the floor. The more he counted, the more the grains seemed to multiply.

"What should I do...?"

Tenchi muttered with the face of someone already burnt out. People have something called a "character." *If you act in a way that betrays your character, you will surely face the consequences,* was Tenchi's honest state of mind right now. In short—the tongue is the source of misfortune? No, wait, what was it? Having internalized the maxims from his grandfather's education, Tenchi, with a short-circuited brain, began trying to desperately fill in the blanks.

"Mya?"

A voice came from his feet. Before he knew it, Ryo-Ohki was sitting there, looking up at Tenchi curiously.

"Ryo-Ohki!"

Tenchi instinctively scooped Ryo-Ohki up. Her soft fur and warmth were comforting.

"You... are you really going to take me? Do you know where Planet Jurai is?"
"Myan!"

Ryo-Ohki looked up at Tenchi and chirped confidently.

"Really?"

Right. There was no need to ask. Ryo-Ohki had attacked the Juraian Royal Palace back in her space pirate days. A glimmer of light finally began to shine into Tenchi's heart.

"The point is, I just need to go to Planet Jurai, meet the Emperor, and get the Water of Life."

Just go straight there and come straight back. Thinking that, his heart felt a little lighter.

"Seeing the universe alone might be nice," Tenchi muttered, imagining a sea of stars like scattered jewels. "I'll be able to use the bathroom in peace... I can take a bath. I won't have to worry about anyone else."

Tenchi's heart felt even lighter.

"I wonder how I'll make food?"

His lightened heart dimmed slightly.

"Maybe Ayeka-san's guardian will take care of it."

Tenchi stood up with momentum.

"Alright. Let's do this!"

Replacing Hokkaido with Planet Jurai... that's a bit of a stretch, isn't it?
Tenchi patted Ryo-Ohki's head, set her down, managed not to trip while going up the stairs, and disappeared into his room.

After dinner, the Masaki family gathered by the pond, holding paper tape and confetti in their hands, ready for the protagonist's departure. Ryo-Ohki had already transformed into spaceship mode and was sitting quietly, her majestic form reflected on the dark water. The departure was scheduled for the night out of consideration for Tenchi, who wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. When Tenchi appeared with a sports bag on his shoulder, confetti rained down, and cheers arose.

"Tenchi-sama, as I wrote in the letter, please take care. My guardians will take care of all your personal needs," Ayeka said tearfully, handing him a sealed envelope. Sasami then offered a three-tiered bento box and a canteen.

"Tenchi-niichan, do your best. Here, this is your bento. I packed mugicha (barley tea) in here too. And I also included your favorite karaage (fried chicken), eggplant shigiyaki, spring rolls, and a variety of fruits." "Thank you, Sasami-chan."

Tenchi accepted the bento bundle, failing to suppress his tears.

"Tenchi-san, please contact us if anything happens. We'll fly over in a shuttle." "Tenchi-san... *sob, sob*..."

Kiyone added this with a serious face. Mihoshi's face was already a mess of tears.

"Tenchi. Take care. Father will be praying for your safety every day," Nobuyuki, holding a video camera, mumbled while focusing on a close-up of Tenchi.

"Tenchi-dono. Here is a sword, a shield, and 500 gold. Use this to prepare yourself."

Washu placed toy equipment and coin chocolates on top of the bento.

"Washu-san!"

As Tenchi was shocked, Washu laughed heartily.

"Just kidding. I just wanted to try it once. You know, the 'Hero's Departure' scene. By the way, bring the Water of Life back in the special tank inside Ryo-Ohki. Also, give my regards to the Emperor and Empress of Jurai. And this—a ring for self-defense. It has a 'shock mode' that works on any creature. This is a special service."

While putting on the ring he received from Washu, Tenchi looked at the people lined up, overwhelmed with emotion.

"Thank you. I... I'm off." "Tenchi, wait!"

Ryoko flew out and placed a box of sweets on top of the chocolates. "I went all the way to Okayama Station to buy these. Take care on your journey."

Tenchi looked at the box of sweets. It said "Famous Kibidango." Tears welled up in Tenchi's eyes.

"Ryoko... I'm not Momotaro." "Ho-ho-ho. Well, that's fine, isn't it?"

Katsuhito interrupted the two.

"Tenchi. Don't forget your suburi (sword practice). Do one set of push-ups and sit-ups too. Never forget that you are a wielder of the Light Hawk Wings. If you

neglect your training, your skills will dull immediately." "Grandpa, you don’t have to scare me like that."

Katsuhito waved his finger at Tenchi's voice. "It’s a warrior’s pilgrimage. Have you already forgotten?"

Tenchi gave up. "Yes, yes. Well then, I’m off."

Ryo-Ohki gave a single cry: *Myaaaaaan*.

"Have a safe triiiiiip!"

As Tenchi settled into the bridge, Ryo-Ohki began to quietly lift off from the ground. Ayeka, Ryoko, Sasami, Father, and Grandpa were all waving their hands vigorously. The paper tape caught on Ryo-Ohki’s bow fluttered and then drifted away.

"I’m really leaving now..." Tenchi muttered, looking up at the star-filled sky while standing on the bridge. "Tenchi-dono seems moved." "Indeed. And for us, there is no greater joy than being able to return to our homeland."

In the corner of the bridge, Azaka and Kamidake were chatting leisurely.

"Ryo-Ohki, let’s go!" Tenchi called out. "Myaaaaaan!" A spirited cry came back.

Tenchi watched the surface of the Earth, which was moving away at tremendous speed, with a heart full of emotion.

"It’s okay. I have my bento, my wallet... huh!?"

Tenchi’s hand searched his pants pocket. "No... my wallet is gone!!" "Myaaaaa... an!?" "Tenchi-dono. What happened?" Azaka and Kamidake flew over in a panic. "The wallet Grandpa gave me is... I don’t have a single coin."

Ryo-Ohki had already passed through the stratosphere and was setting a course outside the solar system.

"You have no money? We didn't prepare any travel funds..." came the reply from Kamidake, who seemed to have turned pale. "Tenchi-dono, you won't need money once you reach Planet Jurai." "That is correct. Tenchi-dono is a prince of the Juraian Royal Family. Please, do not be disheartened."

Azaka added to Kamidake’s words.

"But, what if... something happens... like pirates attacking..." Tenchi’s voice was already turning into a sob. "It will be fine! Tenchi-dono, one who has nothing has nothing to fear!!" Azaka and Kamidake chanted powerfully. "You say it’s fine, but..."

Cold sweat broke out on Tenchi’s forehead. He couldn't go back to Earth now. *Please, let nothing happen, and let me reach Planet Jurai as soon as possible*.

At the same time that Tenchi was offering prayers on Ryo-Ohki's bridge, Katsuhito was watching the news on the sofa in the empty Masaki house, tossing and catching a wallet filled with Pan-Galactic Common Real Money.

"Tenchi. A warrior’s pilgrimage is not a sightseeing trip. You must traverse the universe with your own strength. They say a lion throws its cub into a deep valley. Don't think ill of me."

Fully aware that Nobuyuki and all the freeloaders of the Masaki house were glued to the monitors in Washu’s lab, Katsuhito dumped the contents of the wallet he had swiped from Tenchi’s pocket onto the table. The exact amount of Real Money for a round trip rolled out, glistening.

Chapter 2:

Farewell, Earth...

Farewell, Earth... Sitting on the floor of the empty bridge where crystal fragments of Ryo-Ohki lay scattered, Tenchi stared blankly at the panoramic screen. A classic song from yesteryear played over and over in his mind.

"Tenchi-dono." Azaka called out to him. "Tenchi-dono, come now, do not be so disheartened. We are here with you," added Kamidake in a comforting tone.

Ryo-Ohki had already left the solar system and was continuing on a standard course toward Alpha Centauri. Scenes that no human had ever laid eyes on were unfolding right before Tenchi's eyes, but as for the man himself, he just continued to stare vacantly at the screen, exactly as he had been before.

"That's right, why not try contacting Washu-dono?" Kamidake said enthusiastically. "At this very moment, she should be monitoring our course from her lab in the Masaki house. Being the greatest genius in the universe, Washu-dono might think of a clever solution." "And it's not as if Washu-dono didn't install an Ansible," Azaka added soothingly.

"Contact her? And do what?" Tenchi finally turned to look at his guardians. "Tell them, 'I forgot my wallet, can you deliver it for me?' If I did something like that, I'd never hear the end of it from them for the rest of my life."

Tenchi stood up sluggishly and shook his head. "Azaka. Kamidake. Let me ask you... we just need to go straight to Planet Jurai, right? We don't need to stop anywhere, do we?" "We do not understand Ryo-Ohki's energy system well," Kamidake answered. "Is it not fine as long as there are carrots?" Azaka added, his tone uncertain.

Tenchi pictured the new carrot-clone cultivation system that had been added to Ryo-Ohki's living unit. He imagined himself diligently scooping up mountains of carrots and tossing them into Ryo-Ohki's mouth—or furnace—and then, of

course, Ryo-Ohki charging through the pitch-black void of space while puffing steam out of her ears.

"I... I'm going to sleep for a bit. Wake me up if something happens." "As you wish."

Tenchi rubbed his temples, leaving the guardians behind as they harmonized their worried responses. He opened the door leading to the living unit and stumbled out of the bridge.

Among the private rooms connected to the bridge via subspace, one room that had been used for storage was temporarily renovated by Washu for Tenchi; it was a compact living space complete with a bath and toilet. Tenchi flopped onto the bed and stared at the sports bag he had brought along.

"It's so quiet..." Saying it out loud seemed to make the silence feel even more profound. "I wonder if they're still awake."

He felt like he was on a night train heading toward the ends of the earth. Of course, it was silent inside the subspace—there were no mechanical running sounds or whistles to entice a lonely boy with wanderlust—but Tenchi's ears were forcibly trying to pick up the imaginary vibrations.

Still... "Damn it...!"

Finally unable to endure the silence, Tenchi sat up and turned on the audio system. Soothing vocals softly filled the room. As the acoustic sound told a story of setting out on a journey in search of true love, Tenchi collapsed onto the bed again, inhaling the scent of the brand-new sheets and pillowcase.

His heart was restless. It was what he had wanted so much... a time alone, undisturbed by anyone. To sleep when he wanted, wake when he wanted, and do as he pleased. Now that it had become a reality, Tenchi felt as if a hole had opened up in his heart.

Tenchi sat up abruptly and began restlessly organizing his sports bag. "Let's see... Ayeka-san's letter, videotapes, photos, souvenirs..." The daily necessities had already been moved into the room, so the sports bag contained things to hand directly to Ayeka's parents—the Emperor and Empress of Jurai—as well as items to relieve the boredom of the trip... snacks, magazines, and photo collections he couldn't show to girls.

Tenchi shoved the photo collection into the desk drawer, tossed the rest into the bag, and set it beside the desk.

"I've run out of things to do..." Tenchi muttered, sitting on the bed.

I'm bored... Had he ever been this bored before? If he had known it would be this boring, he should have brought some study materials. Tenchi stood up and wandered over to the bookshelf, flipped through magazines, but his heart remained unsettled. *Isn't this the same state as a prisoner suddenly being released?* he thought, sighing. How pathetic. To be at a loss with this heaven-like freedom...

Tenchi sat on the bed again, then gave up and threw himself back down. "I'll sleep. When in doubt, sleep." Exercising a modest freedom—the rule-breaking act of sleeping without brushing his teeth or changing into pajamas—he felt a pang of guilt, but used the touch sensor to dim the lights and closed his eyes.

In a few minutes or a few hours, peaceful sleep should have come. But then.

MYAAAAAAN! MYAAAAAAN!

Suddenly, a sound like an emergency call rang out. "Wh-what!? What's wrong!?" Tenchi scrambled up in a panic, tumbling off the bed along with his blanket. *Already? Another problem!?* He fumbled through the air searching for a light switch, only to remember this room didn't have pull-cords. He touched the sub-sensor on the headboard, and the room finally brightened. "Ryo-Ohki! I'm coming!" Tenchi shouted, opened the door to the bridge, and flew out.

"Tenchi-dono!" "It is an emergency!" Azaka and Kamidake flew in with intense energy. "An unknown pirate ship..." "...has launched an attack on Ryo-Ohki!"

Before the guardians could finish, an attack grazed them, shaking the bridge. "A-a pirate ship!?"

An unfamiliar spaceship was projected in the center of the screen. A silver pirate mark shone on a black hull. It was the "skull and crossbones" we all know... the overall shape was a streamline similar to a Galaxy Police patrol ship, but the colors were inconsistent in places, and it was asymmetrical, making it look like the result of repeated repairs. In a word, it was an old-fashioned spacecraft on the verge of becoming scrap metal. Of course, there was no way Tenchi could have known that. Our protagonist, who was now

also the captain of this Ryo-Ohki, could only stare blankly at the pirate ship before him.

"What shall we do, Tenchi-dono?" "I have been trying to communicate for a while, but there has been absolutely no reply." "O-oh..." Tenchi listened to the report while remaining stunned. Now that he thought about it, it was a ridiculous situation. They were being attacked by a pirate ship, yet he was just standing there waiting for communication. Fortunately, it seemed Ryo-Ohki's maneuverability was superior; all the pirate ship's attacks were missing, wasting their energy.

"Ryo-Ohki, do you know them?" Tenchi gave up on asking his useless guardians and looked up at the third crystal. "Mya? Mii~" A question mark appeared on the screen of the terminal at hand, followed by a long, streaming line of them... it seemed she was deep in thought.

I should have mentioned this sooner, but do you recall the hemispherical controller on the pedestal in the center of the bridge? A cockpit-like seat had been installed there for Tenchi. Yes, thankfully (though he wasn't really doing the flying), he didn't have to stand up the whole time he was on the bridge. Since Ryo-Ohki could only cry "Mya," a communication terminal had also been provided. With the scientific power of Washu, who had undertaken the modifications, one would think making Ryo-Ohki speak Japanese would be child's play, but the tastes—or rather, the reasons—for that decision were unknown.

As Tenchi stared at the endless stream of question marks as if hypnotized, a male voice suddenly broke through the communication channel.

"RYOKO!! Have you forgotten me!? What kind of joke is this! You think you can play dumb, but it won't work!!"

Instantly, the question marks vanished from the terminal screen, and the hull lurched violently. "Myan myan!" "Eh?" When Tenchi, who had tumbled out of his seat due to Ryo-Ohki's sudden action, asked back, a low growl was returned. "Myan myan! Uuu~ Grrrrrr!" The growling grew higher in pitch.

"Ryo-Ohki-dono! What has happened?" "Who is this 'Seiran' person?" The guardians asked back in a panic.

"Seiran!?" Tenchi asked back this time. Looking at the terminal, the characters for "Seiran" were indeed flickering on and off. "Ryo-Ohki, what is this about? Explain it properly!" Ryo-Ohki answered with "Mya-mya, grrr, mya-myan," and the characters on the terminal began to flow at high speed. "Wait a second, I can't read this! A little slower..."

Another communication burst through. "Are you running away, Ryoko!? Just you wait! I'll drag you down to hell!" Along with the voice came a volley of charged particle cannon fire. Ryo-Ohki accelerated and fled. The pirate ship pursued relentlessly.

Ryoko!? Tenchi thought in a panic. *I see, that pirate named Seiran thinks Ryoko is on board this ship. I don't know what happened, but I can't blame him... this is Ryoko's ship after all... but Ryoko, what exactly did you do!?*

"Wait, Ryo-Ohki!" Tenchi shouted, then yelled at the Ansible. "It's a misunderstanding! Ryoko isn't on this ship! I'm a human from Earth named Tenchi! Stop the attack!!" "What did you say!?" Seiran's voice returned, sounding shocked. "Ryoko! You... you brought a man along! Damn you, I'll blow you to smithereens!"

Arrows of particle beams rained down on Ryo-Ohki. "W-wait. Please, wait..." In that instant, the stars reflected on the screen warped. "MYAAAAAAAAN!!" With one cry, Ryo-Ohki warped...

Five days later in Earth time, in the lab located in the subspace beneath the Masaki house—or, more accurately, deep in the subspace—panic had erupted.

"Ryo-Ohki vanished!?" "What on earth happened?" "Could it be a traffic accident..." "If it were that, we would have received a report from our Earth station first." "Washu-chan, what about Tenchi-niichan?"

Ryoko, Ayeka, Sasami, Mihoshi, and Kiyone—all five of them had rushed over and were crowding around Washu, talking over one another.

"Well, it seems like she bumped into a pirate ship..." Washu shrugged. "It looks like she did a scramble warp. I've been busy the last two or three days and haven't checked the monitors. Well, there aren't many ships that can match

Ryo-Ohki’s maneuverability, so I think she’s fine. The record includes the voice of a pirate named Seiran. Want to hear it?"

"Seiran!?" Ryoko frowned. "RYOKO!! Have you forgotten me!?" Suddenly, a deep, resonant male voice rang out. "Ah...!!" Ryoko’s eyes widened. A look of clear trouble appeared on her face.

"You know him, don't you?" Ayeka, who had caught the scent of trouble faster than anyone else thanks to her "woman’s intuition," grabbed Ryoko’s arm.

"That bastard... he’s still holding a grudge... after all this time..." Ryoko muttered to herself, eyes fixed on space, but then suddenly grabbed Washu by the collar and tightened her grip. "Lend me a ship! Now!"

After Washu sharply slapped her hand away, Ryoko reluctantly let go. "Honestly, threatening your own mother by grabbing her collar? What kind of personality do you have!?" Washu glared at her with arms crossed. "So, what did you do? It’s probably a story from back when you were a space pirate, isn't it? A hit-and-run? Pickpocketing? Or a falling out among thieves?"

"....." Ryoko stood speechless, her mind racing. *That is the one thing I don't want to talk about. That connection...* Especially... Ryoko glanced at Ayeka’s face. *Especially in front of this piranha. That was a page in my youth... a jewelry box of memories hidden deep within my heart...* As she muttered those embarrassing words she couldn't let Ayeka hear, Ryoko finally opened her mouth to speak, but then...

"Isn't Seiran that space pirate who was caught trying to sneak into the Saiou house?" Kiyone offered, not realizing she was providing assistance.

"Oh, I remember now!" Mihoshi clapped her hands. "He’s the one who was in the 'Galaxy’s Funniest Crimes' book. He’s the clumsy pirate who had his partner steal all the jewels while he ended up getting caught..." "Right, right! And in the end, those jewels were just replicas the Saiou house made for general ceremonies." "And then, he coated his body with a 'zero-reflectivity' invisibility drug he bought from a traveling merchant, and he was completely naked..." "And as he was trying to escape..." "The princess of the Saiou house mistook him for a pervert and had him thrown out." "Pervert... ah-hahaha!" "That was hilarious, wasn't it, Kiyone?" "And that partner of his was..."

After a moment, both turned silently toward Ryoko.

"Ryoko-san, surely you don't mean that pirate's partner...!"

Ayeka finished the sentence for them.

"W-what of it? Is that a problem!?"

With everyone's eyes focused on her, Ryoko flushed and stepped back.

So that's what happened...

That Seiran.

The same Seiran who had been so serious and the very model of a pirate.

"I see. So Tenchi-dono was mistaken for Ryoko," Washu sighed.

She narrowed her eyes, glaring at Ryoko.

"Well, no wonder he's carrying a grudge. He must have been chasing Ryo-Ohki for the longest time."

"Ugh..."

Again, the gazes converged on her, and Ryoko stepped back even further.

"As I thought, this woman was the cause of it all," Ayeka started up this time. "To be targeted by such a third-rate pirate—Tenchi-sama must surely be troubled. We must clear up this misunderstanding quickly."

"Once they've appeared, we can't just leave it alone," Kiyone added while scrolling through data on her bracelet. "This qualifies as an emergency. Mihoshi, let's go in your shuttle."

"I shall accompany you as well!" Ayeka followed instantly, grabbing Ryoko's arm firmly.

"Ouch. I said I wasn't going to run away, so let go!"

"Of course you wouldn't. After all, you are the one responsible..."

"I'm telling you, that's not it! I'm saying *I* am going!"

Ryoko shook off Ayeka’s hand and glared at the group.

"You don't need to go marching along in a big crowd. I’ll just go and settle it myself, right? So, Mihoshi, lend me your shuttle for a bit."

Internally relieved that nobody had dug deep into her past relationship with Seiran, Ryoko patted Mihoshi’s shoulder as if to say the matter was now closed.

"Um, according to Galaxy Police regulations, we aren't allowed to lend our ships to other people..." Mihoshi replied, looking troubled. "Besides, Yukinojo is set to only respond to the voiceprints of myself or Kiyone."

"That’s right. That’s why Yosho-dono had Tenchi-dono take Ryo-Ohki, didn't he? I told you, didn't I?"

"You didn't!"

Ryoko turned toward Washu, looking fed up.

"You didn't say it, but that’s beside the point. The reason I lent Tenchi Ryo-Ohki was because I thought Ryo-Ohki could judge the situation and manage on her own. If I had known it would turn into this, I would’ve kicked you all aside and gone with Tenchi. If I were on board, we’d be near Planet Jurai by now. Without me, Ryo-Ohki can only output half her power and can’t even attack properly. Didn't I tell you that?"

Ryoko’s concern was actually rooted elsewhere, but it was certainly true that she was worried about Tenchi.

"You did not!" Ayeka shot back with tremendous intensity. "Then what will become of Tenchi-sama!? I entrusted Tenchi-sama to Ryo-Ohki! What will you do if something happens to Tenchi-sama!?"

"Even at half power, she’s better than your Ryuo seedling! To think you put those useless logs of yours on my Ryo-Ohki—I’m going to make you pay for the fare!"

"What do you mean 'log's!? Call them by their proper names: the incomparable guardians of the incomparable Juraian Royal Family!"

"They look like logs to me!"

"Wait, wait, big sisters!"

Sasami intervened at the perfect moment between the two, who were on the verge of grabbing each other.

"I don't think this is the time to argue about who said what or whose guardian is which. Where is Tenchi-niichan now? Is he safe?"

"And you seem to have forgotten, but the reason Tenchi-san left alone was because of your fighting, wasn't it!?"

Kiyone made a sharp point, and Ayeka and Ryoko were momentarily lost for words.

"Hey, hey, where is Tenchi-niichan? Sasami is worried. Is he eating his meals properly? Ryoko-chan, too." Sasami looked up at Washu with a serious face.

"Sasami..." Even Ayeka blushed, ashamed of their immature behavior.

"Well, because she pulled a scramble warp... we won't know where she'll pop out until she actually does. Still, I don't think she went outside the galaxy. More importantly, I'm worried about that pirate named Seiran. He seems like a dangerous character..."

"Oh, Tenchi-sama!" Ayeka, having turned pale at Washu's words, clasped her hands in prayer.

"Let's go! This is no time to be fighting here. We must explain the situation to Tenchi's father and find him as soon as possible!"

"Hey, wait a minute! I'd rather die than go with someone like you!" Ayeka started running, forcibly dragging Ryoko—the very person she had been fighting with moments ago—by the arm.

"Kiyone, what should we report to Section Chief Nobeyama?" Mihoshi asked as she followed.

"We're reporting it as Ayeka-san's escort. That is our primary mission, after all."

"Are you staying home, Sasami-chan?" Washu asked Sasami, who was about to run after them.

"Eh, why? If big sister and Ryoko-san fight inside Mihoshi-san’s shuttle, I’m the only one who can stop them."

"That’s true, isn't it?" Washu smiled, patted Sasami’s head, and said, "Good, good."

"I think this all the time, Sasami-chan, but you’re the most level-headed one in this house. You should be the one to inherit the Juraian Royal Throne."

"You are too kind," Sasami replied with a polite bow, then looked at Washu and burst into a bubbly laugh.

"So, you’re coming too, right Washu-san?"

"Ryoko’s still hiding something, you see." Washu grinned, nodding toward the door. "That girl is honest to a fault; it’s written all over her face, isn't it? Leave it to me. I’ll be sure to expose her secret."

A smile similar to the one Washu wore when she discovered a scientific proposition appeared on one side of her face.

Meanwhile, Tenchi—or rather, Ryo-Ohki, who had been wandering through subspace after the scramble warp—dropped out of warp in a sector of space exactly 800 parsecs away from the solar system.

"...Ryo-Ohki."

Having experienced a scramble warp for the first time, Tenchi shook his head and looked around.

"I thought the universe had vanished," Tenchi remarked with a very simple impression, staring with curiosity at the unknown sector of space projected on the screen.

"Where is this? And what about that pirate ship, Seiran?"

"Mya-mya~" Ryo-Ohki cried, and Kamidake answered.

"She says she does not know."

"She doesn't know?" Tenchi repeated, stunned. "What do you mean, she doesn't know?"

"Coordinates aside, this is a sector we have never visited, so we have no data. There is no response from Seiran."

"Never visited..." Tenchi repeated anxiously, then suddenly realized something.

"Azaka, Kamidake. Can you understand what Ryo-Ohki is saying?"

"We have learned it." "We have learned it." The two guardians harmonized.

"Ryo-Ohki’s cries are a compressed language. That is to say, high-level information is compressed into subtle changes in the pitch of her 'mya,' intonation, sentence endings, and the length of the sounds."

"Is that for real?" Tenchi asked, unable to believe it immediately.

"We cooperated to perform pattern analysis. We are able to translate it into standard language, but it seems that when we convert it into Juraian or the Japanese that Tenchi-dono speaks, the benefits of the compressed language are lost and it becomes difficult to speak."

"Shall we try speaking it?"

Azaka signaled his partner Kamidake by flashing the jewel on the top of his main body, then cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Mya? Myamyan, myan?"

"Mya~!"

Ryo-Ohki answered happily. Tenchi stared at the crystal Ryo-Ohki and Azaka—who were facing each other, blinking the jewels on their foreheads and tops of their heads—with a furrowed brow.

"Just now, I asked: 'Greetings, Ryo-Ohki-dono; what is your favorite food? How much of it do you eat in a day?'"

As Tenchi stared at Kamidake with his mouth hanging open, Kamidake continued.

"She answered: 'I love carrots, especially those picked from the field behind the Masaki Shrine. I don't really like the clone-cultivated ones because the vitamin content is lower and the texture isn't quite as good, but since Washu-chan went to the trouble of installing it for me, I won't complain. I'll eat as much as there is, though it provides very little energy.'"

"....."

This time, Tenchi was truly speechless as he looked between the crystal Ryo-Ohki and the guardians.

"Did that short conversation really contain all that information?"

"We still cannot keep up with Ryo-Ohki's compression rate." Azaka, who had spoken the Ryo-Ohki language, answered apologetically, and Kamidake added:

"Ryo-Ohki's language layers many pieces of image information upon one another. For example, if we were to ask for coordinates as the ship's computer, as we did just now, a three-dimensional model would be projected directly into the listener's linguistic center—incorporating our current position, nearby star systems, their respective distances, the nearest service station, our current heading, and even scenic spots or historical sites. There is likely an even more highly compressed, advanced exchange of information between her and Ryoko. We are a type of information processing agency, but we are fundamentally bound by standard language—that is, a form of thought that unfolds along a timeline—so this is the best we can do."

"In other words... what, it's like Ryo-Ohki is talking about a lot of things at the same time inside your heads?" Tenchi, having never had such an advanced informatics discussion, asked with a sense of bewilderment.

"As expected of Tenchi-dono. That is correct."

There was a response that was clearly meant to be flattery, and the four of them—or accurately, Tenchi, the crystal Ryo-Ohki, and the two guardians—fell silent.

"In any case, it seems we have shaken Seiran."

"There is no danger at present."

As if returning to their senses, the guardians spoke and turned back toward the screen.

Ryo-Ohki was sailing slowly through the unknown sector.

Suddenly, something twinkling in the distance to their right caught their eye.

"A star... no, it couldn't be," Tenchi narrowed his eyes, and the guardians stopped their movements.

"It looks like a planetary station."

"Let’s get a bit closer."

As they drew nearer, the identity—or rather, the majestic appearance—of the twinkling object became clear.

It was about the size of kagato’s former space ship,The *Soja*. The overall form was multilayered, with overlapping wings trimmed with countless lights. If one didn't consider that this was deep space, far removed from Earth, it looked like a single gigantic rose floating in the darkness.

Furthermore, a huge ribbon was tied to the lower part of that massive rose, and on that ribbon, the following glowing characters were floating:

"Welcome to the Incomparable Hall of Entertainment! Welcome to the Garden of Pleasure, the Night Palace."

With a numbing sensation of pleasure, Tenchi could clearly read the complex kanji characters, but perhaps the light characters themselves were information that had been converted to stimulate the pleasure center in the brain as they traveled from the hypothalamus to the brain cells. After all, the sounds of Juraian being whispered between the guardians next to him—who seemed overcome with emotion—reached his ears.

"T-Tenchi-dono..."

Kamidake, having returned to his senses, looked toward the slowly rotating rose while busily blinking his jewel.

"This is... I have never heard of such a thing. Who on earth built this, and for what purpose..."

That was when it happened.

"Welcome visitors, we are ready to guide you~"

A sultry female voice echoed through the bridge, and a part of the massive rose’s petals slowly flipped upward.

Chapter 3:
This Way, Please!

"Please, come this way."

Behind Ryo-Ohki, who had been sucked into the interior of the giant rose, the petals closed without a sound.

"Please follow the guidelines and moor your ship slowly. Once you have disembarked, please wait there for a moment."

The sultry announcement cut off there.

Tenchi and his group stood frozen in the center of the bridge, staring blankly at the guidelines projecting soft light and the mooring bridge that was gradually drawing closer.

"Tenchi-dono, what shall we do?"

"You ask what we should do, but..."

Tenchi and Kamidake looked at each other, but no particularly good ideas came to mind.

"Do you think this is some kind of trap?"

"I do not know. Ryo-Ohki-dono does not seem to think so, however..."

And there, the conversation cut off again.

The bridge appeared to be a standard mooring bridge like those seen at space stations or convenience stations, with nothing particularly unusual about it. There were no employees or ground crew in sight, and a laid-back melody played faintly, as if caressing the visitors.

Whether it was because of the music or the soft lighting, the complete lack of the anxiety one *should* feel when visiting an unknown place like this was, if anything, what made them uneasy.

"It is a rather simple facility for an 'Incomparable Hall of Entertainment'..."

"Appearances can be deceiving. Regardless, this good mood is strange. In the first place, what does 'Night Palace' mean?"

"If 'night' implies a realm of darkness for intellectual activity, then this would be a place where logic does not apply."

"In that case, as we are living information processing agencies endowed with personalities and emotions, it is possible that we could be defeated by our subconscious consciousness."

"No, no, that’s reading too much into it. It might just be an entertainment facility that provides hedonistic services—something like a high-class secret club."

Azaka and Kamidake were whispering such things, but seeing Tenchi staring blankly with a dreamlike expression on his face, they suddenly fell silent.

Ryo-Ohki moored perfectly to the bridge and cried, "Myaaan."

"Eh?" Tenchi asked back, as if coming to his senses.

"Carrot," Azaka muttered.

"She says 'carrot,'" Kamidake added. "Mountains of carrots. Swimming in an ocean of carrots, digging through mountains of carrots, sleeping on a futon of carrots..."

"I..."

Tenchi looked at the crystal Ryo-Ohki with a bewildered expression, then shook his head and said:

"I was dreaming of my mother. No, it wasn't a dream. I don't even know if it was my mother. A woman's hand—soft and warm—was wrapping around me..."

Tenchi suddenly turned his head away and went silent. The guardians were facing each other, busily blinking their jewels, but seeing Tenchi silently start to leave the bridge, they called out to him in a panic.

"Tenchi-dono! Do not go down there." "We know nothing of this place. The fact that we feel no danger or anxiety suggests there is a possibility that some form of information manipulation is taking place."

Tenchi stopped and looked back at his guardians. "No, I'm just trying to ask for directions... At the very least, if I follow that announcement, I think I might be able to meet someone."

"Myaan!" Ryo-Ohki, who had reverted from her crystal state back to her "beast-type" (the cat-rabbit form), hopped past Tenchi and went ahead. Tenchi started to say something, but seemingly changed his mind, turned on his heel, and left the bridge.

"Ryo-Ohki-dono!" "Tenchi-dono!" The guardians panicked and hurried to follow him.

As the group stepped onto the mooring bridge and looked around, that sultry voice called out once more. "Please proceed straight ahead and enter the spot in the center." With the voice, a spotlight appeared in the center of the floor. Tenchi and the others looked up at the ceiling and down at the floor, but they couldn't see any lights that would be forming the spot. Nevertheless, a column of soft light connected the ceiling to the floor, waiting for the visitors.

"Somehow... this feels like an RPG." "What was that?" Azaka asked. "Role-Playing Game. You know, like when the protagonist and his friends arrive at a place they don't know, and they have to go around asking everyone where they are or what their next objective is." "Is it similar to simulation training? And what happens to the protagonists?" Kamidake asked this time. "They gather information... and probably... head to the next location. While they're at it, they pass through dungeons and enemies attack them one after another." "And... what is their ultimate objective?" his tone suggesting he didn't really want to know. "To defeat the final enemy, who is unim8aginably strong and terrifying."

A moment of stunned silence drifted through the air. "Please, spare us," Kamidake hurriedly interjected. "We did not anticipate a situation like this. Well, it is a 'trouble' precisely because it was unanticipated, but as far as we are concerned, it would be best to make a sharp right turn and leave this place immediately. We have the mission of retrieving the Water of Life, after all." "I agree," Azaka added.

I should probably feel the same way... Tenchi thought, remembering the vision he had seen on Ryo-Ohki's bridge. The woman in that vision had no identifiable face or physique. Only her white hands and the sensation of her soft, warm body had a breathing reality as they enveloped him. Just remembering it made his heart restless. *What... what on earth was that?*

While Tenchi and the others were dawdling and talking, Ryo-Ohki had been sniffing around, ears perked up, and scratching at the walls, but she suddenly dove into the column of light.

"Ah, Ryo-Ohki-dono!" Just as they thought they heard the echo of a "Myaaaan!" ringing across the floor, the column of light emitted a strong flash, and Ryo-Ohki's form vanished. "Ryo-Ohki!" Tenchi impulsively dove into the column of light to follow her, and the stunned guardians followed suit.

...Some time after Tenchi and the others had vanished: With the announcement, "One guest, right this way~," a spaceship arrived. It was a spaceship seen somewhere before, with a black hull and a skull-and-crossbones mark.

"Please follow the guidelines and moor your ship slowly. Once you have disembarked, please proceed to the spot in the center." A similar announcement was repeated, and a tall man stepped down from the pirate ship. Underneath a black cloak, he wore a black jacket with silver trim and black boots. He had sandy-colored long hair tied carelessly with a crimson bandana. As he impatiently brushed away the hair falling over his forehead, he narrowed his eyes and looked up at the column of light. His deep, melancholy ultramarine eyes—like lapis lazuli—narrowed slightly.

"Ryoko... Today is the second happiest day of my life. To think I could live to see you again." The man muttered in an ominous voice, then vanished into the column of light.

Meanwhile, the Galaxy Police shuttle, which had made a scramble launch from the Masaki house's subspace hangar, was wandering through the sector where Ryo-Ohki had warped.

Mihoshi's shuttle was 150 meters long and was a standard-type patrol ship with standard weaponry. At least, that was what was listed in the official registry. In

reality, it was a type of experimental ship using various cutting-edge technologies provided by the Galaxy Academy, but that data was top-secret, and within the department, it was treated as something special.

Everything from the shuttle's hull and weaponry to the hyperdrive system, the interior, and Yukinojo—the ship's self-evolving brain—used custom-made materials and new technology. The massive costs, which the Galaxy Federation Council's audit agency had pounced on, were partially covered by the private assets of her grandfather, Director Kuramitsu. One could call it a "granddaughter-obsessed" spaceship.

The shuttle, which had nearly become a ghost ship in subspace, had been saved by Washu. If it had remained missing, and if not for the Kagato incident—and the achievement of rescuing Princess Ayeka and Princess Sasami—even as the granddaughter of Director Kuramitsu, Mihoshi would likely have been transferred to general administrative duties by now, which would effectively be a firing. That was how expensive the shuttle was.

Thanks to the power unit, which occupied 70% of the hull, the living space was very narrow for a shuttle of this class. Aside from the cockpit, Mihoshi's private room, and Kiyone's private room, the rest had to serve as a hallway, training room, dining room, infirmary, and briefing room all in one.

"...Honestly, that I, the First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family, should have to sleep on the floor in a large shared room..." Ayeka complained while folding the futon she had brought from the Masaki house. "But Big Sister, there are no other rooms, so what can we do?" "Mihoshi-san and Kiyone-san have their own private rooms, don't they? No, I understand. This is a Galaxy Police patrol ship, and it cannot be like the Ryu-Oh. I understand. I am not such a selfish woman. Sasami, go over there!"

Chasing away Sasami, who was happily jumping on the stack of two futons, Ayeka glared sharply at the center of the room. There, Ryoko was sprawled out asleep, and Washu was lying on her stomach on a futon, flipping through a dictionary at incredible speed, despite it being less than three days since they brought them.

"Washu-san! What is the fun in reading that!?" "Eh?" Washu finally lifted her face from the dictionary, sat up on the futon, and cracked her neck. "My neck is tired. Honestly, I'm just so bored." Washu picked up the mountain of

dictionaries in various languages she had piled around the futon and dumped them into the trash chute.

"My, what are you doing? What a waste..." "But they're in the way, right? If you want to talk about value, even one square meter of empty space in this shuttle is worth more than the market value of the Masaki house."

Washu's answer left no room for rebuttal. "I already memorized them. I'll act as a dictionary for a while." "Memorized them?" Ayeka repeated, recoiling at Washu's calm gaze. "Well, Mihoshi and Kiyone told me not to mess with this shuttle, and Yukinojo is stubborn, you see."

Washu had tried to connect her laboratory in the Masaki house's subspace to this shuttle and had run head-first into Galaxy Police regulations. "I went through all the trouble of wanting to heavily modify this shuttle into a ship that wouldn't lose to the *Soja*." "S-surely the Federation Council wouldn't permit such a threatening ship!" Ayeka shuddered, remembering the majestic, terrifying sight of the now-destroyed *Soja*. She didn't know what this mad scientist—who looked like a young girl but was actually an estimated 22,000 years old—was thinking.

"Well, anyway, Yukinojo's capacity is too small to do anything. He says if I try to introduce a flexible system to solve the hull structure load at maximum output, both the capacity and the budget will explode. Though, Yukinojo is self-evolving, so if he is convinced, he would likely solve the problem by adding systems, changing thought circuits, or submitting data to Director Kuramitsu. But right now, he has absolutely no intention of doing so. He says introducing one system creates ten contradictions... well, he's old-fashioned."

Ayeka had been listening to this long-winded explanation as if hypnotized, but suddenly came to her senses and interrupted. "That's not it! Where is Tenchi-sama now? We don't have time to be wandering around in a place like this. Honestly, what are Mihoshi-san and the others doing?"

"If it's those girls, they're doing their best to perform interviews right now," Washu said, nodding toward the cockpit. "Unfortunately, there isn't even a convenience station in this sector, and they said they finally tracked down a missionary caravan that happened to be passing by at the time."

"A missionary caravan, you say?" "To be precise, it’s a stateless wandering spaceship. It’s a kind of religious organization. They are people burning with religious zeal to spread the teachings of 'Kourin-sama' throughout this galaxy."

"Um, everyone, could I have a moment?" Mihoshi appeared, clutching a bunch of things in her arms, just as Ayeka and Washu were talking. "Regarding the investigation results, the crew of the missionary caravan did indeed see two spaceships engaged in battle. They said one warped, and the other warped a moment later. I had to take the onboard machine all the way to a distant convenience station just to hear that much. Yes, here are the souvenirs."

Mihoshi handed out cheap bracelets containing glowing objects and amulets with "Kourin" written in the common tongue to Washu and Ayeka.

"What is this!" Ayeka shouted upon being handed occult goods. "Because they said they wouldn't tell me unless I bought them," Mihoshi muttered sulkily, playing with the faintly glowing bracelet on her own arm. "You are a detective, aren't you? Aren't you embarrassed to be threatened and sold such dubious things!?" "It’s fine. Kiyone has already lectured me enough."

Seeing tears welling up in Mihoshi’s eyes, Ayeka sighed. "And so, you found out Tenchi-sama’s whereabouts, right?" "No." Mihoshi looked down and gently stroked her bracelet. "A kind believer told me that if I wore the ring of Kourin-sama, who governs the truths of the universe, I would definitely be able to find him..." "Kind!?" "If Mihoshi-dono says so, it might be true." Washu flashed a wicked smile, twirling the bracelet in front of Ayeka’s nose. "What do you think?"

Ryoko, who had awakened at some point, was staring out the porthole into space with a moody face. "Ryo-Ohki is now in a place whose name I don't know... inside... a single rose blooming in the universe." A tense silence filled the space for a moment.

"What about Tenchi-sama? Everyone is safe, right? What do you mean by a single rose? If you knew, why didn't you tell us sooner!?" "Shut up. I didn't know either until Ryo-Ohki returned to normal space!" Just as Mihoshi thought the usual fight was about to begin, Ryoko turned away. "It’s hard to recover an astral link that’s been broken once. Of course, it’s not linked via normal space, but using a scramble warp causes the link in higher dimensions to diffuse. I have to undo those properties and convert the energy. You get it!?"

It was a rare, serious tone. Ayeka found it strange but decided to retreat for the moment and attack from a different direction. "Understood. I thank you for discovering Tenchi-sama’s location. So, where is that place? How do we get there?" "No point in telling you." Ryoko said, spitting the words out, and left the room.

The remaining Ayeka, Washu, and Mihoshi stared at each other in silence, then began to whisper. "What was that! That way of speaking!" "Ryoko-san, what has happened to you?" "Who knows. If her biorhythm is low, she’ll have to become a 'white-clad angel' again."

Mihoshi didn't respond because she knew that nothing good ever came of Washu becoming a "white-clad angel"—in other words, a nurse with a red cross on her hat. But Washu was thinking something else entirely. Given Ryoko’s response, there was no doubt that she was convinced a pirate named Seiran had pursued Tenchi—no, Ryo-Ohki. She didn't know how he had synchronized with Ryo-Ohki’s scramble warp, but since the current Ryo-Ohki only had half her normal performance, it must have been possible to track her.

The one most impatient right now was Ryoko. It was obvious if you looked at her face. In this situation where Seiran was chasing Tenchi and they were chasing Tenchi, if Ryoko had a reason she didn't want them—especially Tenchi—to know, it was reasonable to assume it was a deeply private matter. To put it crudely, a tangled web of love and hate with an old flame was likely close to the truth.

Washu realized a smile was naturally forming on her face after reaching that conclusion. "The best part is yet to come," Washu smiled at Ayeka as she walked through the hallway leading to the cockpit. "I think it’s foolish myself, though." "Washu-san, what are you talking about?" Mihoshi peered curiously at Washu’s face. "Don't worry, you’ll understand soon enough. I am the greatest genius in the universe, but I make it a rule not to speak on conjecture." "Tenchi-sama..." Ayeka’s pace quickened. It seemed she couldn't think of anything other than Tenchi.

When they entered the cockpit, Kiyone and Yukinojo were discussing something with serious expressions. Ryoko was leaning her elbows on the console with a sullen face. Sasami was looking at the screen from a spare seat, looking bored.

"Good. I was just thinking about going to call you." Kiyone turned around from the cockpit. "It’s unreasonable to pinpoint the coordinates, so I think it’s more certain to do short drives and correct our course each time rather than doing a long drive and missing our target sector. Yukinojo agrees." Kiyone asked for Washu’s agreement in a crisp tone, characteristic of an elite detective.

"I’ll leave it to you. Hey, Washu-san." Mihoshi agreed casually. "Hurry it up. Instead of lingering over the discussion, shouldn't you just leave the orbital calculations to Yukinojo..." Ayeka started to say in a high-handed tone, but since Sasami turned around with a surprised look, she mumbled the end of her sentence.

"Aww, it’s boring. No one will play with me, Ryoko-chan isn't here either... I want to see Ryoko-chan soon." Sasami took off the Kourin ring she had been wearing and held it up to the light, but then her eyes suddenly lit up and she turned around. "Hey, hey, look. There’s something written on this. Someone read it!" "Eh?" Ayeka and Mihoshi peered through the bracelet. "...I can't read it. It doesn't look like the common tongue." "Kiyone, how about you?" "You always buy such strange things..." Kiyone pulled off the ring she had reluctantly put on her arm and held it up to the light against the ceiling. "It’s true. It’s got an angle to it. Let me see..." "This is an ancient sacred script. Wait, *love is the*..." "Love is the light that illuminates the void. Light is the immutable truth."

Ryoko’s low murmur cut off Washu. Ryoko didn't even look at the bracelet. "I’ve had one too. A long time ago." Ryoko tossed aside the Kourin ring she had taken from Sasami and left the cockpit quickly.

"I just remembered..." Washu looked around at the group with a grin. "This is a love charm for a mystical union. Oops, that’s not a story to tell a child." "My..." Mihoshi blushed and stared at the bracelet again, intensely. "What do you mean 'mystical union'? Hey, hey, is that something 'naughty'?" Sasami, who was quick-witted, slid off the seat and ran over.

"Yukinojo, short drive, standby." "Roger. Short drive, standby, full charge." Kiyone turned around to the screen and gave instructions quickly. "I must go brush my teeth," Ayeka said and left the cockpit quickly. "Mihoshi! Hey, come over here!" "Y-yeah. Yukinojo, ready, start."

Meanwhile, Washu had left the cockpit. "...Honestly!" Sasami glared at the screen with puffed cheeks, but gave up and curled up in the spare seat, hugging her knees. A moment later, noise ran across the screen. Mihoshi’s shuttle accelerated and vanished from normal space.

Around that same time, Tenchi and his group were taking their historic first step from the column of light. A long, long silence froze Tenchi’s body. The moment the spell was broken, everything began to move as if exploding. The orbiting galaxies played a melody of spirals, elementary particles composing tangible and intangible life danced in ways yet unknown, and... A wave of pleasure, as if swallowing his very existence, surged toward him.

Perhaps that feeling lasted less than a single moment. "Who... are you?" Tenchi’s voice trembled. Or rather, it wasn't even certain if he had actually made a sound. "Welcome to my Night Palace... Prince of Light." From deep within a veil scattered with stars, a voice that melted the five senses rang out directly in his mind.

Chapter 4:

Prince!

"Prince," the voice spoke again. "Do not be afraid. Come closer." This time, it was a voice he could clearly hear with his ears, but Tenchi's feet wouldn't move, as if frozen. No, he *couldn't* move. The moment they took a step out of the column of light, Tenchi and the others had been cast into the middle of the void. A sea of stars spreading in all directions, a void with nothing to obstruct it, a dark universe spreading beneath their feet and above their heads. Only one spot in front of them was covered in a veil of deep darkness, and the voice was coming from there.

"Azaka..." Thinking, *Where could that Ryo-Ohki have gone?*, Tenchi finally pushed out his voice. "If you don't mind, could you try moving a little?"

There was definitely a sensation beneath his feet. It felt like stepping on a soft carpet. But when he looked down, there was nothing there. Only where he stood was made of a transparent footing; if he took even one step out from there, he might fall endlessly into the void... That thought was freezing Tenchi.

"Geez, you're exasperating. Why are you just standing there?" Before Azaka could take action, the veil scattered with stars swayed. It was a sexy voice that seeped into one's very bones, but it held a slight trace of irritation.

"Um..." Tenchi tried to call out to her but realized he still didn't know her name. "Who on earth are you..." "Do you not know the name of the Queen of Night?"

The veil swayed again and opened silently to the left and right. Simultaneously, his field of vision opened. A woman sat on a golden, shining throne. Her hair was like pitch-black darkness, her face was as if a shining moon had been carved out, and a deep indigo dress scattered with the stars of the galaxy wrapped around a perfect proportion that he had never laid eyes on before. Beside her, one woman with her face covered by a veil in a black dress, and another in a gray dress, stood guard as if to protect the queen.

"You will not fall into the void, so come closer. I want to see your face." The Queen of Night smiled bewitchingly. Feeling as if his inner thoughts had been seen through, Tenchi bit his lip. "Yes, come closer."

Tenchi stepped forward timidly, stopped, and at the urging of the queen, moved forward again. The guardians remained silent and awestruck behind Tenchi. Or perhaps they were at a loss for what to do and were observing the situation. Caught under the spell of the queen’s amethyst-like purple eyes, Tenchi stepped forward to the front.

"You are trembling. Are you so afraid of me?" The queen stood up and slowly descended the steps. With every step, the stars on her dress twinkled, and her dazzling bare legs peeked out from the deep slit.

"The appearance and the speech of this queen are merely following your own hidden heart. But this form is quite comfortable." The queen lifted her finger and traced Tenchi’s cheek. "What do you desire, Prince of Light? I will not say it is free, but there is nothing that cannot be obtained in the territory I rule. State your wish."

The queen’s hot breath touched Tenchi’s cheek. It was a scene to which lines like *her hair is fragrant, her breath is sweet*... could be applied just as they were. Tenchi instinctively averted his eyes from the purple eyes that felt as if they were going to suck him in, and when he nearly bumped his nose into the magnificent cleavage peeking out from the deep heart-cut of her dress, he panicked and looked up again.

"Q-Queen-sama." He stuttered. "If you come that close, I-I cannot speak. What... no, what do you intend to do with us?" "I will not take you and eat you. If that is what you are worrying about." The Queen let out a light laugh, hugged Tenchi’s shoulder, and turned him around. The woman in the gray dress, who had been standing silently at her side, slipped past them.

"I will let your attendants see a dream befitting their status." When the gray-dressed woman silently touched Azaka and Kamidake, the jewels on the top of their bodies went dark. "Ah..." Tenchi was surprised and tried to rush out, but the hand on his shoulder didn't let go. "Do not worry. They will wake up as soon as you call them." The queen, slightly taller than Tenchi, wrapped her arms around him as if to hug him from behind. A moist weight pressed against Tenchi’s back. Tenchi’s heart leaped.

"This is the dream you saw, the comfort your heart was seeking. You set out on a journey in search of love, did you not? A fulfilling love that wraps around you entirely..." The queen's whispers tickled his earlobe, and her hand slid from Tenchi's chest to his abdomen. A numbing pleasure surged up, and he felt as if his body were losing its strength.

I see... that vision was... The faceless vision I saw when I arrived here was... Tenchi tried to urge on his rationality, which felt like it was drowning. *No. Even if this is a dream, even if this is a phantom of the worldly desires I created myself, if you do things like this, my... my foundations, the basis on which I stand...*

"Do you not desire me?" The queen whispered, as if she could see through Tenchi's heart. "Have you not felt lonely since you came racing through the sea of stars alone? The love you were seeking is right here. You only need to reach out your hand and pluck it." "Queen-sama..." Tenchi gathered his last bit of willpower and turned around, and immediately froze.

The dress that had looked like indigo velvet was now transparent like twilight, and the rich curves trimmed with light and the shadows that seemed to collect darkness only there were beckoning Tenchi. "Ahhh..." A dying gasp leaked from Tenchi's lips.

His reason was swept away to the far side of the darkness, and Tenchi's heart was about to depart for a realm where words no longer held meaning. "Now..." The Queen took Tenchi's hand and gently drew him toward her chest. "N-no, I cannot..." Tenchi resisted with a voice as thin as a mosquito's whine. "I am..." *I am what?* Still a minor? Not mentally prepared? To put it bluntly, because I'm scared? Because I lack confidence? Or because there are five women waiting for my return... no, Ryoko, Ayeka-san... As Tenchi reached the peak of his confusion, a peerless, invincible excuse descended upon him like a revelation. "I'm broke!!" "What did you say!?" The Queen's hand stopped. "Do you not even possess ambition?" Looking at Tenchi's face, it was clear at a glance that this was neither a lie nor an evasion.

"Anyone who comes here must pay a price. This is a place that fills what is unfilled and liberates the self. Love for a heart starving for love, comfort for those seeking solace—but it is not free." A smile unlike any before appeared on the Queen's lips. "I have no need for money, but my attendants cannot say the

same. It is a contract to receive whatever reward one desires upon leaving here. Look!"

As the Queen raised her hand, the void was torn asunder, and countless small chambers appeared around them. Within them, all forms of life were squirming. Humanoid types, things with no identifiable shape, things that looked like mere lumps of rock—all of these creatures... whose very genders were uncertain... some were devouring each other, while others were swaying in intimate embrace.

"Even so, those present here are but a mere handful of the species born into this universe. They are the ones capable of reaching this place. Prince, you are the first guest I have ever had who has arrived from a land where even dreaming is forbidden."

Tenchi was glued to one of the chambers, where a man and woman who looked like humans were embracing, but he turned around, startled by the Queen's words. "Why do you call me... Prince...?" "Because I have known you." The Queen's eyes took on a wet, luminous shine. "When your power first manifested, it was like the explosion of a supernova. I trembled with a strange premonition. My heart received a prophecy that the path you tread and my domain would intersect."

The Queen took a step forward. "Even so, the price must be paid. If you have nothing else to pay with, then a part of you will do." A thrill like rapture pierced Tenchi's body as he was held fast in her soft arms. It was an irresistible force, a cocktail of fear and intoxication. *Ah, am I finally going to lose my virginity in an unknown corner of the universe!?*

Just then— "Ryoko-oooooh!" A black shadow tore through the void from the column of light and dove in. "Where are you!?" Suddenly, the spell was broken. "Who goes there!? State your name." The Queen's eyes burned with cold anger. The tall man faltered, looking back and forth between the boy with the stunned expression and the incomparable beauty. "I am a pirate; my name is Seiran. I have come in pursuit of a woman named Ryoko." Despite faltering, Seiran declared this boldly in an unabashed tone. "I saw the woman's ship enter here. Where are you hiding her? I have business with that woman."

"Seiran!?" Tenchi gasped. *So, this is him... the reckless pirate who attacked us!?* Seiran's ears caught Tenchi's voice. "You!?" He strode up and grabbed

Tenchi by the lapels. "You're the voice from before—no, the man! What did you do with Ryoko!?"

"Impudent fool!!" The Queen swatted Seiran's hand away sharply. "There is no one here by the name of Ryoko. How did you pass through the guard system? No one harboring murderous intent in their heart should be able to pass." "Murderous intent!?" Seiran let go of the lapels and looked up. "I have merely risked my life to pursue Ryoko. Do you call those feelings murderous intent?"

Caught between the Queen of Night and the pirate, Tenchi felt like a piece of peanut butter in a sandwich, staring up at Seiran. *He's cool*... That was a decisive line truly worthy of a hero—no, a protagonist. *I'd gladly give up this spot, so please, just forget about me*. Wishing he could teleport like Ryoko, Tenchi began to crawl away.

"Wait!" Seiran's hand clamped down on Tenchi's collar. Something cold was pressed against his neck. "I still have things to ask you. Come!" Seiran dragged Tenchi up and, keeping his gun pressed against him, shoved him from behind.

"What do you intend to do with my guest!?" The Queen stood in their way. "Seiran, was it? Since coming here, you are the first man I have seen whose heart my power cannot reach. However, I cannot allow you to snatch him away. Yomi!" The Queen signaled to the woman in black who had been waiting like a shadow. The woman nodded slightly and began to walk forward as if gliding.

"Release the Prince before that hand touches him. A deep abyss far deeper than sleep shall drag you down!" Tenchi felt Seiran's body tense up with instinctual dread. Then, the black robe fluttered through the air. "Run!!" Seiran impulsively scooped up Tenchi, shoved the Queen aside, and began running toward the column of light.

"A-Azaka! Kamidake!!" Tenchi's shout at the motionless guardians and the moment the pale hand reached for Seiran's shoulder were almost simultaneous. "Uwaaaah!" A cry of pain burst from Seiran's throat. "Seiran!?" "Fly, quickly!" Even while twisting his face in agony, Seiran threw Tenchi with all his might, and he himself dove into the column of light. A moment later, both their bodies were enveloped in a torrent of light.

"We’re close. One more drive away," Ryoko muttered while staring at the screen in the shuttle’s cockpit. Everyone was gathered in the cramped cockpit, looking up at the screen just the same. All that was displayed was raw sector data; this vicinity was particularly empty—a sector with nothing but vast, hollow space.

"Where is Tenchi-sama?" Ayeka asked impatiently. "Annoying. Keep quiet," Ryoko replied, eyes closed and brow furrowed as she called out to Ryo-Ohki. "That’s strange... I can see carrots." Just when Ayeka thought she couldn't wait any longer, Ryoko murmured this. "Not just a normal amount. A mountain of carrots—no, an ocean. That idiot, he’s soaked in carrots up to his head..."

"Carrots?" Kiyone turned around, looking puzzled. "Is he inside the clone cultivation system that Washu-san installed?" "No," Ryoko answered, brow still furrowed. "It’s only Ryo-Ohki. Tenchi isn't nearby. Neither are the guardians." No one understood what Ryoko’s words meant, but Ayeka had a bad feeling.

"I... I have a story I heard from my father when I was small," Ayeka began, hesitating. "They say there are monsters that nest in the vast universe that feed on the dreams of sailors, showing them the very dream they most want to see... The sailor is devoured while dreaming. They become empty. In ships that never return, there are sailors whose spirits have been eaten away like that, drifting as dried-up mummies..."

"Stop it!" Sasami covered her ears. "Did Tenchi-niichan get eaten?" "I didn't say that!" Ayeka shook her head, shivering at her own story. "Tenchi-sama is protected by Tsunami. Ryo-Ohki is probably just drunk." "I didn't load any alcohol. Not unless she’s making carrot wine out of carrots," Washu muttered, though not to anyone in particular. "Washu-dono, there are several accidents in my data as well where the cause is unknown. It is not impossible that Tenchi-dono has encountered such an unidentified space lifeform..." "That’s right. Ryoko-san, let’s go, quickly," Mihoshi interrupted Yukinojo. "Direction?" Ryoko silently pointed to a spot on the display. "Yukinojo, short drive, standby. Kiyone, data set, please."

Kiyone said nothing unnecessary. "Data set complete. Let’s go, Yukinojo." The shuttle plunged back into drive space.

"A-are you okay?" Tenchi looked back at the tall pirate. Seiran's left arm was hanging limply by his side as if paralyzed. "Don't say unnecessary things. Where is Ryo-Ohki!?" The place they had emerged from the column of light was indeed the familiar floor of the mooring bridge, but neither Ryo-Ohki nor Seiran's pirate ship was in sight. "I don't have time to go searching. Hey, you said your name was Tenchi, right?" Seiran pointed his gun. "Call Ryo-Ohki. I'll break the bulkhead with the ram."

Then, multiple columns of light appeared on the floor. Guards—no, guard robots—materialized. It seemed there was no time to argue. "Ryo-Ohki!" Tenchi shouted at the top of his lungs. *I am not Ryoko.* He had no confidence that he could call Ryo-Ohki when he didn't even know where she was, but in this situation, he had no other choice.

"Tenchi-dono!" Contrary to expectations, a different voice answered. The guardians materialized on both sides of Tenchi. "We apologize." "We do not know Ryo-Ohki's whereabouts."

The guard robots—or rather, it was unclear if it was even correct to call them robots—shaped like humanoid coffins, crept toward them, slowly closing the distance to surround them. Seeing as they didn't attack, it was likely that capture orders had been issued.

"Keep calling her." Seiran looked around vigilantly while keeping his gun leveled. Tenchi resigned himself and closed his eyes. He called out to Ryo-Ohki in his heart. He felt as if he could see Ryo-Ohki, who was gnawing on a mountain of carrots. "Ryo-Ohki! Help me!" A "Myaaaaann" echoed through Tenchi's mind.

Light raced between the coffin-shaped robots arranged in a circle. "Tenchi-dono, it is a binding barrier. Shall we execute a space transfer?" Azaka asked, seeking consent in a whisper. Tenchi did not answer. He continued to call out, even more intensely. Meanwhile, the ring of light from the coffins was completed and slowly began to close in.

"Myaaaaan!" The moment Tenchi thought he heard the voice from above, a crack formed in the ceiling. "Ryo-Ohki!" A sharp ram pierced through the ceiling and stabbed into the floor. Tenchi and the others felt their bodies float lightly, and they were space-transferred. Ryo-Ohki, having gathered them all inside, thrust straight through the bulkhead and leapt out into open space.

"Ah!" Inside the shuttle that had dropped out of drive, everyone in the cockpit saw it. A gigantic rose blooming in space. And Ryo-Ohki, leaping out as if to shatter its petals.

"Ryo-Ohki!!" Ryoko screamed. "Wait for me, I'm coming!" As Ryoko attempted to space-transfer, Ayeka clung to her arm. "I shall accompany you!" "Ayeka-san!" Kiyone instinctively grabbed the sash of the vanishing Ayeka. "Wait!" Mihoshi threw her arms around the waist of the vanishing Kiyone.

"Big... sister!?" By the time Sasami ran over, the four of them had already vanished from the cockpit. "Big sisterrrrr..." Tears welled up in Sasami's eyes as she turned around. "...They left."

During the commotion, Washu had remained a perfect bystander, leaning against the door, but seeing Sasami tear up, she hugged the girl's small shoulders. "Oh dear, those bad girls. Leaving the ship and everything else behind." "I wanted to see Ryoko-chan too," Sasami sobbed, wiping her tears and nose with her sleeve together. "Stupid, stupid Ryoko-onee-chan! Stupid Ayeka-onee-sama!" With nowhere to vent her anger, Sasami clung to Washu's chest and began to cry.

"This is absolutely absurd!!" the voice of yukinojo came from behind. "What on earth am I supposed to do!? If I report that I've been abandoned by my masters, I'll be scrapped!"

"I feel the same way," Washu muttered, patting Sasami's head. "Since we have no choice, let's keep Washu-chan as the captain. Start by giving me a situation report."

"Roger," Yukinojo blinked the display as if trying to pull himself together. "An Adamski-type saucer has been launched from the unidentified giant ship. It is pursuing Ryo-Ohki." "Ryo-chan!!" Sasami looked up, surprised. The screen showed the situation exactly as Yukinojo reported it. "Hey, hey, Ryo-chan is going to get away!" "We will pursue for the time being," Yukinojo, lacking any crew to give him orders, began to chase Ryo-Ohki and the saucer at full speed, as if he had given up on everything.

"Too bad, but this won't catch up to my masterpiece. That's why I told you to install a flexible system." "It is no use telling me that now." "Oh, Ryo-chan is...

disappearing!" In the center of the screen, Ryo-Ohki, displayed about the size of an egg, flickered. "Yukinojo, monitor her carefully!" Before Washu’s words had even finished, Ryo-Ohki’s form vanished in an instant.

"She scramble-warped again," Washu shrugged, watching the saucer turn around like a boomerang after losing its target. "Still, your master had a communication bracelet, didn't she?" "The Miho-Kiyo bracelet? Unfortunately, it doesn't have that much output." "What is that!?" Washu’s cheeks softened in amusement. "It refers to Mihoshi-dono and Kiyone-dono," Yukinojo lowered his voice. "It is a secret." "Eww," Sasami giggled. "Yes, yes, that face suits you much better," Washu laughed, hugging Sasami’s shoulders and seating her in the cockpit’s rear seat while she sat down in front of Yukinojo.

"Well then. Staying here seems like it will only lead to trouble, so go ahead and execute a short drive for now. Or should we go investigate that unidentified ship?" "I cannot put minors in danger. Eventually, an Ansible communication will come through anyway." "Oh that’s right, I forgot I attached one to Ryo-Ohki," Washu winked at Sasami to reassure her, then turned sharply to give her orders. "Yukinojo, short drive, standby. Target: the nearest convenience station!" "Roger!" The screen switched to a 3D display, and a smiley-face mark representing a convenience station appeared.

Chapter 5:

Saved...

"Saved..." Tenchi, who had transferred to Ryo-Ohki's bridge just in the nick of time, muttered while pinned beneath Seiran and the guardians. "Myaaaaan!" Ryo-Ohki's cry tore through the void, and the crystals scattered across the bridge began to wake up one after another. "She says she is sorry." "She says it's okay now," the guardians translated rapidly. "I understand. I understand, so please move," Tenchi said, unable to move, as he patted the floor with his hand. "My apologies." "It was all so sudden."

Suddenly, his body felt lighter. At the same time, a powerful shock ran through the bridge. Ryo-Ohki had burst through the rose petals—no, the bulkhead—and leapt out. Tenchi instinctively ducked his face, and when he felt the impact subside, he looked up timidly.

Seiran's face was right in front of him. Seiran, who was kneeling on one knee before Tenchi, was still pale, but he seemed to have recovered from the earlier shock. "You, Tenchi. I will offer you my thanks, for now. Can you stand?" Seiran extended his right hand—the one he had free—and helped Tenchi up.

This guy... he might actually be a pretty good person. Even without using his dominant hand, surely there were other ways he could have lifted Tenchi up. Tenchi thought this as he looked up at the pirate, who was a head taller than him. Without those ultramarine eyes, one could say he was an Earthling.

But he was a man who clearly belonged to a different world than Tenchi or his father. His well-defined features, in which not a hint of fragility could be felt, combined with his body, which concealed great strength, created a kind of dangerous charm. Seiran approached Tenchi quite naturally. But his eyes were looking down at Tenchi coldly. They were the cold eyes of a pirate. Tenchi corrected his earlier impression. This was the man who had been holding a gun

to him only a moment ago. He must have been confident that he could afford to keep his dominant hand occupied for even a single moment.

"Now then, shall we talk?" Seiran opened his mouth. His voice was calm, but it had an air of refusing to be argued with. "Ryoko is..." Tenchi started, then hesitated. *What should I tell him?* Tenchi had never heard about Ryoko's past. He knew she was created by Washu's hand on the ship of the now-deceased Kagato long ago. And seven hundred years ago, she was sealed away by the Jurai Prince Yosho—his grandfather—and fell into a long sleep. Yes, until one year ago, when Tenchi had broken the seal with his own hands. But anything before that—the stories of her time as a pirate—he knew nothing of. What kind of relationship did this pirate, Seiran, have with Ryoko?

"Ryoko is at my house. No..." Seeing Seiran's complexion change, Tenchi realized he had started off wrong. "I don't mean it like that, she's become a member of the family. No, I mean, for me, so... you know, how should I put it..." Suddenly, Tenchi's lapels were grabbed, and he choked for breath. "You!!" It was an atmosphere where he could be killed by a glare alone. "What does that mean! Tell me clearly! What is your relationship with Ryoko!?"

"Tenchi-dono!" The guardians flew over. "Pirate, take your hands off Tenchi-dono!" "Tenchi-dono, let us kick this guy out!" The guardians took positions right next to Seiran, sandwiching him. "It's alright. Azaka, Kamidake," Tenchi hurried to restrain the guardians. Judging from their short acquaintance so far, this guy was quite dangerous. He wanted to discuss things as peacefully as possible. "My way of saying it was bad. I, too, owe this person a debt from moments ago." Tenchi recalled the events of about ten minutes ago, when he had almost lost his virginity. "Don't misunderstand. Ryoko is at my house because of various circumstances, but there is really nothing going on between us. But if you hold me like this, I can't say anything."

Seiran's eyes flickered with hesitation. Then, his hand suddenly let go.

"Fine. I'll wait until we're finished talking."

Just then, "Tenchiiiiii!!"

Suddenly, someone appeared in mid-air. Simultaneously, they collided with Tenchi.

"Ugh..." He didn't even have time to dodge. Two soft, yet resilient swellings pressed against him. Even if this were deep space, far from Earth, there was no mistaking this voice and this sensation.

"Ryoko!?" "Tenchi-sama!"

Collapsing as if piling onto Tenchi, who had fallen while tangled with Ryoko, was another familiar figure. "Tenchi-san!" Then, two more women in Galaxy Police uniforms piled onto them. "Guh-eh..." Tenchi had meant to say *Ayeka-san*, but it only came out as the sound of a crushed frog.

"Tenchi!! Are you safe!?" "Tenchi-sama, I am glad you are unharmed." "Tenchi-san, are you injured?" Three—no, four—women began speaking at once.

"Ugh..." A muffled groan came from beneath the feet—no, beneath the bodies—of the women. "M... Move..."

Where Kiyone, Mihoshi, and then Ayeka and Ryoko suddenly jumped away, a strange man in black lay sprawled out.

"It can't be..." Ryoko gasped. At that voice, the man suddenly sat up. "Ryoko!?" "Seiran..."

In that instant, seven hundred years of time, anger, and sorrow vanished from Seiran's mind. The only woman he had ever truly loved. The woman he had traveled the stars with, raced across the universe with, and pledged eternity to. And the woman who had betrayed him and left.

"Ryoko-oooooh!!"

Forgetting his immobile left arm, Seiran tried to embrace Ryoko. In that split second, an Aura Blade was thrust at Seiran’s throat. "Don't move!"

Ryoko stood in his way, as if shielding Tenchi. Her eyes, her stance—they were not a hair different from the Ryoko of that day he remembered. The cold, yet burning-hot gaze of the female pirate stared back at him.

"Ryoko... why!?" A gasping mutter leaked from Seiran's lips. "Have you forgotten me!?"

The Aura Blade trembled slightly. "I'm not a pirate anymore. I've forgotten all about you."

A heavy silence descended upon the room. If anything were to break that silence, it would have been the trumpet of the Last Judgment.

"Myaaaaan!"

What actually rang out was a bit more realistic and hinted at a much more immediate situation. Ryo-Ohki had issued a warning.

"What, pursuers?" Ryoko withdrew the Aura Blade. "Seiran. We'll talk later. That is, if you want to stay alive long enough to finish the conversation."

As if freed from a binding spell by those words, the frozen Tenchi and the others looked up at the screen. A dozen Adamski-type saucers had been launched from the interior of the giant rose and were closing in on Ryo-Ohki.

"Ryo-Ohki, scramble warp!" Ryoko shouted once in a high pitch, then accelerated. The stars distorted and flowed radially, and in that moment, Ryo-Ohki’s body vanished from this sector.

The Queen of Night received the report from the watcher. "They have executed a scramble warp. I will wait for them to warp out and pinpoint the coordinates." It was the same soft voice as the announcement Tenchi had heard.

"It is fine, Ain. There is no need to rush. It seems more fates will intersect than I had anticipated. Until then, I shall wait."

"Tsukuyomi-sama[1]," the voice called Ain whispered. "Why did you let them escape? With your power, it should have been easy to bend that Prince to your will."

"Well, who knows why." The Queen smiled as she leaned back comfortably into her cushions. The golden throne Tenchi had seen was gone; the Queen was now in a luxurious small chamber. Two women—the masters of Sleep and Death—stood like statues at her sides.

---

[1] Shinto god of the moon and night in Japanese mythology

"That pirate... Seiran, was it? He is the first person to have ever shoved me aside. A foolish man." The Queen relaxed her cheeks as if truly amused and asked the woman in black beside her, "Do you not think so, Yomi?"

The woman in black nodded heavily.

"Dissatisfied that I let the prey escape? Well, it is fine. That left arm will be of no use anymore. Unless, of course, one has the Water of Life." As the Queen extended her palm, a glass filled with a transparent liquid appeared. "Time will eventually ripen. For me, who lives forever, waiting is a fine way to pass the time."

The Queen pictured the still-young face of the Prince of Light and moistened her lips with her tongue, satisfied.

Some seconds or minutes later—though asking the time during a scramble warp is meaningless—the screen once again returned to normal outer space.

"Ryo-Ohki!" Ryoko shouted sharply. "Myaan!" Ryo-Ohki answered without a moment's delay. Ryoko turned around. "It’s okay. We are near a standard route; we only jumped about three parsecs. There are no signs of pursuers. There is no danger." Saying only that, Ryoko turned back around.

Tenchi exhaled as if coming to his senses. He cast a side-glance at Seiran. Seiran was staring intently at Ryoko, not moving a muscle. His ultramarine eyes reflected the light, filled with a freezing glow. His lips remained pulled into a tight, straight line, leaving his thoughts unreadable.

Ayeka, Kiyone, and Mihoshi seemed to be looking at each other, confused. It was no wonder. Tenchi thought back on the series of events, which had felt like riding a roller coaster. *If Ryoko and Ayeka-san hadn't appeared back there, things might have become much more troublesome for Seiran and me*.

Because Ryoko had appeared, one of the things Seiran wanted to ask him had been resolved. But even for someone who didn't know the situation, the exchange between Ryoko and Seiran just now made the general situation clear. Seiran and Ryoko had had a deeply private relationship. There was no doubt. They had had that kind of relationship long before Tenchi was born.

Tenchi felt a sense of indescribable misery as he realized he was turning this over in his mind. *It has nothing to do with me.* A calm voice in a part of his brain said. *In the end, I know nothing about Ryoko.* If an old flame comes chasing after her to stage a scene right in front of him, that's none of his business. *I haven't even shared a single kiss with Ryoko.* There was no reason for him to be interrogated or threatened.

Tenchi thought this, but the miserable irritation did not subside at all. *What is this guy!!* Tenchi stole another glance at the pirate in black. The way he stood with his brow furrowed, backed by the darkness of space, looked incredibly picturesque—not a single complaint to be made. *Yes, he must have been watching the stars on this bridge just like this seven hundred years ago.*

Damn it, he's cool! He was Ryoko's lover. *Why didn't you tell me until now!?* Tenchi cursed in his heart. ...*Well, I suppose it's not like I asked.*

"Space Pirate, Seiran!" While he was lost in thought, someone beat him to it. "You attacked Ryo-Ohki... a ship carrying civilians. We have the record. I am arresting you on suspicion of attempted murder." Kiyone had her gun drawn.

"I didn't know. What's wrong with a pirate attacking a pirate's ship?" Seiran answered calmly. "Sorry, detective. I don't have time for such idle talk. Besides, wouldn't you rather hear my story?" When he finally turned his face toward Kiyone, Seiran gave a smirk. It was the smile of someone who knew the effect of his own words.

"I will hear it. In a jail cell, at your leisure." Kiyone pulled out handcuffs.

"Wait!" Tenchi shouted involuntarily. "Let him tell it. No, I think I have the right to hear it. Since the person who was attacked is saying it's fine, it's fine, right?" *Damn it, now I look like the poster boy for idiots,* he thought to himself as he stepped between Kiyone and Seiran.

Kiyone shrugged and lowered her gun. "Tenchi-san. This man is a pirate. Just because he hasn't been bothered by the Galaxy Police for these seven hundred years doesn't mean his true nature has changed. If you poke him, plenty of pathetic filth will come crawling out; that's the kind of man he is. It is better not to listen to his story."

"I owe this person a debt," Tenchi said sluggishly. "Besides, even if we don't arrest him, if Azaka and Kamidake just throw him out, that's the end of it. Isn't that right?"

Seiran’s lips curved upward slightly, containing a laugh. "Tenchi. No, perhaps I should call you Prince. You seem to have more courage than I thought. I wonder if that's what Ryoko liked about you." Seiran gestured with his chin toward Ryoko, who was looking away. "Ryoko! Don't sulk over there, come here." It was said in a tone that implied it was only natural.

"Ryoko and I were partners. ...About seven hundred years ago." Seiran leaned against one of the crystals and began to speak. "Our meeting was, well... it was one of those common stories."

The bar in Lamed was crowded with pirates and outlaws. It was one of those shops that was close to the free port, charged reasonable prices, and allowed for an exit through the back door if things went south. *If you're alive, you'll come back to the shop,* was the bartender’s catchphrase. Those who became corpses were just out of luck. In reality, living pirates were too busy drinking, causing trouble, or courting women, which made it noisy; those lying around as corpses had nothing left to do, so they were quiet.

I had just lost my partner and didn't feel like partying. But I also didn't feel like going to a shop with women, so I took a seat at the back counter and sipped Topaz. That was when Ryoko walked in. It was only for a split second, but the shop went silent. Ryoko sat down next to me and ordered the same thing. By that time, I was already unable to take my eyes off her.

"Are you alone?" I asked. "Where did you come from?" Ryoko was unarmed. Anyone who came to this shop without a weapon was either a traveler or an idiot. An Aura Blade appeared in Ryoko’s hand. "Get lost," was her first greeting.

"Wasn’t it just like that, Ryoko?" "Humph." Ryoko looked away again. "It doesn't matter anymore, does it?" "No, it does. I want you to remember. Prince, you want to hear it too, right?" He couldn't say he didn't want to hear it. Ayeka and the others were waiting for the continuation with great curiosity. Seiran wore a relaxed smile.

Three days later, Ryoko and I went off into space. For three years and three months, we paired up and ravaged the universe. We had chilling experiences and did stupid things. We did everything from classic piracy to things that could pass for treasure hunting. We had money to burn, so we lived extravagantly. Ryoko, clad in a dress worth a whole spaceship, was beautiful. The Emerald Sea, where we rented out Club Shamir to play, washed away our fear of death.

But what suited Ryoko best was the dark universe and her battle suit. The sea of stars seen from this bridge was free, but I soon learned that it was more beautiful than anything else. Ryoko was flawless as both a partner and a woman.

But there was a line she would never say. No matter how many tens of thousands of times I repeated the same line, Ryoko would just laugh without answering. It was a smile that could kill me without blinking, all while laughing. I wanted to make her say that line.

"If I bring back the Tear of Neptune, will you say the words I desire?" Ryoko laughed. "Seiran, if you can do it." "Swear on the jewel on your arm." "Like hell I will."

Ryoko removed the ring containing the luminous substance, which she had never removed for any reason, and placed it in front of me. It was a charm from the Kourin religion.

"I swear on this. This is the first gift I ever received since I was born. The woman who gave it to me, I don't even know her name. Having been a pirate since I was born, I thought everything in this universe was something to be taken. Sure, there were plenty of people who offered me things in exchange for their lives. But that woman didn't give me the ring in exchange for her life."

Ryoko’s face suddenly clouded over. "She was dying, pinned under a ship I’d destroyed. She wore rags that even a homeless person wouldn't wear, and her only ornament was that ring. I didn't think there were any survivors, so I went to finish her off. I pulled my hand back quickly, though. The woman called out to me and said this: *May Kourin-sama guide you.* Not a minute after giving me the ring, the woman died. Inside Ryo-Ohki, I remembered that and thought

about it for a while. I didn't understand the meaning. It was written on the ring: *Love is the light that illuminates the void. Light is the immutable truth*."

"That's the same spell I've chanted tens of thousands of times. Ryoko, I'm always telling you, aren't I? I love you." Ryoko's eyes took on a cold light. They were the eyes of a merciless female pirate.

"You're wrong, Seiran. But, if you bring back the Tear of Neptune, I might consider chanting the same spell. It's the same color as your eyes. Your eyes are beautiful, but I can't exactly gouge them out."

And so I snuck into the Sai-Oh family estate, renowned as impregnable. When I got my hands on the Tear of Neptune, Ryoko, you were already gone.

Seiran stopped there and closed his eyes for a moment. "Ryoko. I came here to fulfill that vow."

Seiran stood up and placed an ultramarine gemstone, exactly the same size as the jewel on Ryoko's hand, into her palm. A blue flame flared up on Ryoko's hand, and a brilliance that looked like it had gathered thousands of millions of stars shattered.

"The Tear of Neptune...!" Ryoko's eyes widened. "No way! The records said what was stolen was a replica..." Kiyone couldn't help but raise her voice.

Seiran looked down at Ryoko and answered, "Which will you believe? Me, or the Sai-Oh family?" Ryoko looked up, startled. Seiran picked up the jewel casually and pulled out a ring hidden by the sleeve of his left wrist that had been invisible until now.

"I can tell if I look into those eyes. You are no longer a pirate. But, I will have you fulfill the promise you swore on this ring. Because that is why I have survived until now. Hold out your right hand."

Seiran watched Ryoko, who stood frozen, with satisfaction, and suddenly turned on his heel to stand beside Tenchi. No one knew how he had done it. By the time Seiran had stepped away, a ring—the ring of the vow—was already fitted onto Tenchi's left wrist.

"Eh!?" It was an unexpected event. Tenchi tried pulling on the faintly glowing ring to remove it and twisted his wrist, but the ring was perfectly fitted to his wrist.

"Prince. It is better not to touch it," Seiran said quietly. "That ring has been rigged. If you try to force it off or scratch it, it will explode. It is not much of an explosion, but it has enough power to turn the person wearing it to dust and blow them away."

There was a pause as long as it takes for a shooting star to vanish. In the next instant, Kiyone and Mihoshi readied their guns, and Ryoko thrust her Aura Blade at Seiran’s throat with the force of being flicked away.

"If you kill me, that ring will react immediately. I am the only one who knows the keyword to deactivate it. If you are fine with that, then, pull the trigger." A satisfied smile rose to Seiran’s lips.

"Seiran!!" The tip of the Aura Blade bit into Seiran’s throat. "Ryoko. You have changed. If it were the old you, the moment you obtained the Tear of Neptune, you would have cut me down. You were that kind of woman. Do you remember? Even when you were in my arms, your eyes were cold and clear. When did you become such a kind-hearted woman!? Did you meet the Prince and get reborn? I don't believe that, Ryoko."

Seiran pushed the Aura Blade away and approached Ryoko. "Now, shall you chant the promised spell? Unless you want the Prince to die."

"Ryoko!" Tenchi reacted reflexively. The crest on his forehead began to glow. Light gathered in Tenchi’s right hand, and the *Divine Lighthawk sword* appeared. "Tenchi...!!" The sword, raised at Ryoko’s scream, stopped. "Don't approach! This guy is serious!" "Ryoko!?"

The light vanished from the crest on his forehead. The *Divine Lighthawk sword* faded away.

"A tremendous energy," Seiran muttered as if in admiration. "I thought you had something. Something Ryoko would be interested in. But, Prince. You seem a little lacking in experience. To outwit a pirate like me, that is."

Seiran pulled Ryoko closer with his right arm and looked around at the group. "Detective, find a missionary caravan. However, I suggest you not think of

anything silly, like calling for back-up." "A missionary caravan? The kind used by the Kourin religion?" Since Kiyone didn't answer, Mihoshi asked in her place. "Yes. To make the vow eternal." "Eternal? You don't mean, Ryoko and marriage...!?" "Yes. And you?" "Eh!?"

After Ayeka had said it, she realized now was not the time for that, but instead of correcting herself, she continued. "I am Ayeka, First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family!! It is more than I could wish for to have Ryoko married, but why involve my precious Tenchi-sama!?"

After a breath, she pointed a finger sharply at him. "Remove that ring at once!!"

Chapter 6:

Remove the ring!?

"Remove the ring!?" Seiran involuntarily repeated. "Princess, this guy is a hostage. There is no way I am going to remove it, right?"

"I am Ayeka, First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family!!" Ayeka resolutely stood in front of Seiran and glared at the tall pirate. "Isn't that dirty? If you want to marry Ryoko, do it on your own. I will not forgive you for involving my precious Tenchi-sama. That is why I hate pirates! It will be scary later if you make me angry. Remove it!"

"Wait, wait, Ayeka," Ryoko hurriedly pulled on Ayeka's sleeve. "I'll handle it, so just be quiet. What will you do if Tenchi dies!?" "What do you mean 'handle it'!? What is someone who was cheating going to do? I won't hand over Tenchi-sama to you. Since your old flame came to pick you up, why don't you just hurry up and get married!?" "Ehhh, are you really going to get married!?" Mihoshi interjected.

"Shut up! Why did the conversation suddenly turn into that!?" "Because Ryoko-san, you said it yourself, didn't you? That if he brought back the Tear of Neptune, you'd get married..." "I'm telling you, it's not like that!" Ryoko glared at Mihoshi with a look that said, *Why do you have to say such unnecessary things?*

"Me, married? Don't make me laugh. What I said back then, it was just in the heat of the moment. And this guy took it seriously; how could I remember a promise from seven hundred years ago!?"

Seiran's complexion suddenly changed. The area around his temples twitched, and his hand, resting on the hilt of his light sword, shook. "Ryoko, you..." It was a voice that sounded like it had been strangled. "Is that your true intention? I am the biggest idiot in the universe for going to get the Tear of Neptune without even knowing you were that kind of woman. You really deceived me for seven hundred years!"

"Oh, come on, don't get so serious." Seeing Seiran's twitching face, Ryoko immediately tried to appease him. "I had all sorts of circumstances too, like getting sealed away in a shrine, so I couldn't move. I really thought it was awful. I didn't mean to deceive you..."

"I loved you!" Seiran wasn't listening at all. "Do you understand my feelings? The feelings of a man who realized that the only thing he had believed in for seven hundred years was a fake... Ryoko, are you going to try to deceive me even after betraying me!?"

"It's not a lie!" Ryoko shouted involuntarily, then realized what she'd said. *Dammit, anything I say becomes a lie*. Even though it wasn't like she hated him, bringing up marriage had only led to this kind of troublesome situation. Thinking, *Hasn't this guy always been someone who doesn't listen to what people say since long ago?*, Ryoko decided to humble herself in an attempt to settle the situation.

"Seiran, I was wrong. But..."

"No negotiations!"

The cold reply returned. Ryoko felt the blood rush to her cheeks and bit down on her back teeth. She barely managed to suppress the rising surge of rage.

"Seiran, listen to what I have to say, too!" "What is there left to hear after all this time!?"

Seiran drew his Light Sword. Ice-blue flames flared up. "You remember this sword, don't you, Ryoko? It's a blade that has sipped the lifeblood of hundreds. You know what happens if I unsheathe it, don't you?" "Wait, Seiran!" Ryoko was aghast. " 'Wait'? Are you trying to make me wait even longer?"

The Light Sword swung, tearing through Ryoko's clothes. "Kyaaaaaah! Ryoko-san!" Mihoshi let out a dramatic shriek. "Hey, what are you doing!?" "Ayeka-sama, it's dangerous!" Azaka and Kamidake flew over and space-transferred the entire corner of the bridge, Ayeka included, to safety.

"Seiran! Put that sword away. I'm going to shoot!" Kiyone shouted, stepping in with a blaster in hand. "Shut up. I'll cut down anyone who gets in my way!!"

"Kiyone, look out!" "Kya!" The blaster was sliced in two and clattered to the floor.

"Seiran, stop it!" Tenchi jumped in, forgetting all about the ring. "No, Tenchi-sama! The ring..." Ayeka's scream pierced the bridge. "Ryoko. Wait!!" The Light Sword sliced through a crystal, and Ryoko leapt away.

"No way! That's why you're such a pain! There are tons of women in the universe. Why are you so obsessed with me!?" "I swore a vow to you. To no one else. If you absolutely refuse, then I have no choice—I'll have you pay with your life." "Are you a yakuza!?"

Ryoko's figure vanished for an instant, and when she reappeared, she was wearing her battle suit. She leveled her Aura Blade, glaring at Seiran. Her golden eyes narrowed sharply. "Don't say such crazy things! Didn't I tell you I quit being a pirate? I finally went back to being a normal girl and was living a happy life on a small planet in the frontier..."

Watching Seiran's bewildered face, Ryoko pulled back her Aura Blade and suddenly shook her head like she was refusing to believe it. Her golden eyes welled up, and tears began to gather.

"I was living a humble, modest life on a tiny blue planet that looked like a jewel, even if we were poor. Is it a sin for me to be happy? It was the only small happiness this weak woman ever managed to grab, and you're going to destroy it, Seiran!?"

Everyone present collapsed—figuratively speaking—leaving only Ryoko standing on the bridge with moist eyes.

"Seriously... 'poor,' what are you talking about?" Tenchi crawled back up. "Who are you calling 'modest'!?" Ayeka growled from the corner of the bridge. "Ryoko-san, really..." "Shall we go home, Mihoshi?" Kiyone and Mihoshi exchanged glances and nodded.

"Ryoko... are you happy making a fool out of me!?" Seiran stood up with a look of agony. His hand holding the Light Sword was shaking from sheer rage. "I won't forgive you anymore. Die!"

A blue beam of light slashed at Ryoko, followed by a clash with her Aura Blade. "Seiran, I said stop!" "Shut up, shut up, shut up! How can I stay silent after

being made such a fool of by a woman! I'll kill you and then I'll die myself! Be prepared!!"

Ryoko shot back with a look that certainly didn't seem weak: "You think you can beat me? Put that sword away before you get hurt!"

Tenchi stared at their duel in a daze. It was a strangely "virtual" skirmish, with the Light Sword leaving afterimages of light and the Aura Blade drawing arcs of gold. *What am I, anyway?* the thought crossed his mind. *In the end, what even is this ring?* It was lucky that Seiran had lost his temper, saving Tenchi from being blown away, but was it really okay to keep watching?

A bad premonition chilled his spine. *It has to be me. I'm the only one who can stop these two.* But if he jumped in to stop them, Seiran would surely remember the ring. Even so, wasn't that better than one of them dying or Ryo-Ohki ending up as scrap!?

(Tenchi! Don't run away! A voice echoed in the back of his mind. *This is a journey of training. If you run now, you'll spend your whole life running. Is that what you want!?)*

(*Grandfather...!)*

Tenchi squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists. *But I can't... are you telling me to die?*

Just then, a clear cry of pain went up. *Ryoko!?*

Tenchi jumped up and ran, losing all sense of self. Ryoko had slumped to her knees, head hanging. Her hand, clutching her temple, was stained with blood, and her Aura Blade had vanished. *It can't be...* Unbelievable rage boiled up from the depths of his heart. *Don't you dare die!*

But Seiran was faster. "Ryoko!?" The Light Sword fell to the deck of the bridge, its glow extinguishing. "Ryoko... are you alright?" "Ugh..." Seiran knelt in a daze and timidly moved Ryoko's hand away. The wound running from her temple down to her cheek looked quite deep, and blood flowed down onto her neck.

"Ryoko...!" Seiran instinctively wiped the flowing blood, his face turning pale as he grabbed Ryoko's shoulders. "I was wrong. I just lost my temper. Ryo-Ohki! Help Ryoko!"

Seiran gripped Ryoko in a fit of panic, tears spilling down his face. "I love you! I haven't forgotten you for even a day! You made me wait seven hundred years, and we finally reunite only for us to fight and for you to die!? Ryoko! Say something! Call me an idiot, tell me to drop dead, whatever! I didn't chase after you to do something like this...!"

Seiran was so distraught that he was shaking the badly injured woman violently. Tenchi, unable to keep up with the sudden escalation, barely managed to get a word out. "Seiran!?" "Ryoko! Ryoko!" It was clear that nothing was reaching his ears.

"If you die, I'll die too! I'll come back to haunt you. No, I'll take everyone with me. Ryo-Ohki, the princess, the prince—everyone! I'm serious! You're okay with that, right?" He was at the point where you couldn't tell if he was worried or issuing a threat.

"This guy is..." Ayeka, who had been watching breathlessly from the corner of the bridge, murmured to Azaka. "...He really has extreme mood swings, doesn't he?" "It... it would seem so," Azaka agreed, in a voice that would have shaken its head if it could. "He's just like someone we know."

However, only Kamidake was impressed by that insight. The next moment, Ryoko yelled: "Shut up! Your screaming is making the wound hurt even more!" "Ry... Ryoko!?" "...Oh it hurts... does anyone have a mirror?"

Ryoko stood up, holding her temple, and upon noticing Seiran staring up at her in a daze, she yelled furiously: "What are you muttering about!? You scarred my face! Damn you, I'm paying you back double!"

Ryoko glared at her reflection in one of the crystals, looked shocked at her own face, and ran off the bridge. "Ryoko!?"

Seiran jumped up, finally noticed Tenchi's presence, and stopped. He picked up the Light Sword and sheathed it. "Um..." "What is it!?" Faced with the curt reply, Tenchi was struck dumb. *Thank goodness.* It could have easily turned into something much worse. Relief flooded his chest. Tenchi breathed a sigh of relief and peeked at Seiran, who was looking away in anger.

"Thank goodness... I thought Ryoko was going to die... Huh?" The bridge tilted violently. Tenchi stumbled and scrambled to squat down. "What's wrong, Prince?" "No, I'm fine... just a little dizzy..." "Tenchi-sama, what happened to

you!?" Ayeka ran over. "It’s okay... it’s nothing. Just, I..." "You felt sick from seeing the blood, didn't you?" "No. That’s not it. It’s not that, but I... how should I say it... now that I’m relieved, I’m suddenly starving..." "Oh my...!" Ayeka instinctively exchanged glances with Seiran.

"What a pathetic guy." "You can say that, but I haven't eaten or drank anything since the Palace of Night..." "Oh my, is that so?" Mihoshi placed both hands on her cheeks in surprise. "Wait just a moment. I’ll go ask Ryoko-san."

Seiran sighed and sat down next to Tenchi. "Don't remind me of unnecessary things." "Eh?" Tenchi looked up. "I haven't eaten anything either, come to think of it." "Haaaah..." Tenchi lost even the energy to speak, curled his knees, and closed his eyes.

In the end, it was Mihoshi who saved Tenchi and Seiran from starvation. While pouring hot water into six cups of ramen, Mihoshi busily handed out chopsticks, wiped up the water spilled on the bridge floor, and began to time the minutes with excitement.

"I know you’re hungry, but please wait exactly three minutes. Ah, be careful, it’s hot!"

Ryoko, refreshed after washing her wound and taking a shower, took her cup of ramen with a grumpy face, a bandage plastered on her cheek. "Shut up! I know that even without you telling me." "Ryoko-san, really, I'm so glad it wasn't anything serious." "....." Ryoko glared at Mihoshi with eyes that could have killed the girl's carefree expression. For a while, only the sound of slurping noodles echoed through the quiet bridge.

"Hey, hey, can I ask you something?" Mihoshi started, unable to wait any longer. "Seiran-san and Ryoko-san, you were lovers, right? What was Ryoko-san like back then? This person here, she never tells me anything at all! I was really surprised when I heard it for the first time. Did you fight like you do now back then, too?"

"Mihoshi!" Kiyone poked her in surprise. "Hey, not right now..." "Oh, that’s not true. It’s better to get it cleared up in front of Tenchi-sama, isn't it? Otherwise, I can’t settle down. Right, Ryoko-san?"

"Ugh..." Ryoko choked, the ramen suddenly turning into a foreign object in her throat. "Ryoko was the number one woman in the universe!" Seiran, who had been focused on his ramen without a word, announced proudly. He set down his cup, wiped his mouth, and looked around at the group as if to say, *Any complaints?*

"And she still is today! I almost missed the truth. I was blinded by a moment's anger and almost lost Ryoko forever. I don't believe in gods, but from this moment on, I will. The God who reigns over the universe has protected true love. I was right!"

"Ahhh..." Ryoko sighed, looking drained. "...That's why I hate this guy."

With Seiran in his own world of enthusiasm, an awkward mood drifted among the others. "I am sorry for involving you all. But please understand, it all stemmed from true love. Please, forgive me." Seiran bowed with a sincere expression, ignoring the group's thoughts.

"I assume you will remove the ring from Tenchi-sama's wrist?" Ayeka, thrown off by the simple apology, frowned. "This is a serious act of piracy! If this were Jurai, it would be a capital offense!" "I cannot die, for Ryoko's sake!" Seiran immediately retorted. "Princess Ayeka. I promise to remove the ring as soon as I am married to Ryoko. As long as the Prince does not interfere, I will not use it. I swear it on my life."

"A pirate's oath..." Ayeka started, but stopped as if she had suddenly received a revelation. "Come to think of it, it's understandable, isn't it?" Ayeka quickly signaled Tenchi. "He thought he was betrayed by his beloved; even I might go mad. Very well. I acknowledge your vow."

Ayeka nodded magnanimously, like a princess. "Now that is decided, you must fulfill your vow as soon as possible. I, First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family, and as representatives of a legal institution, First-Class Detective Mihoshi and First-Class Detective Kiyone of the Galaxy Police, will stand as witnesses. Mihoshi-san, why don't you try contacting the Kourin religion's caravan?"

"Oh... you're right. To get married, we have to have a ceremony, don't we?" Mihoshi stood up innocently and went to make the Ansible call.

"Wha..." Ryoko gasped, completely stunned. "What are you doing on your own..." "What do you mean 'on my own'?" Ayeka interrupted Ryoko in a firm

tone, using the full weight of her royal dignity. "You are the very person who caused this from the beginning. You have no right to speak. Look, one wrong move and everyone would have been space dust. We have forgiven you, and on top of that, we are going to bless you and send you off. What more could you possibly say?"

"Ayeka, damn you..." Ryoko realized she had been beautifully outmaneuvered. Truly, the power of love is a terrifying thing. The God of Love who reigns over the universe had remembered Ryoko's betrayal. And now, he had surely bestowed a brilliant strategy upon Ayeka's head and made her tongue glide smoothly.

"Is it okay if Tenchi-sama dies?" Ayeka asked with a beaming smile, delivering the final ultimatum. "....."

It was a total defeat. The only options left were to scream or fly into a rage, but with Seiran, the greater threat, standing by, either choice would put her at a disadvantage. If Seiran blew his top again, someone would definitely die. Ryoko shivered, remembering that that someone might have been herself.

"Tenchi..." Ryoko looked at Tenchi with a desperate face. *It was a short time, but it was fun.* The parting line was already on her lips.

"It's wonderful, isn't it, Tenchi-sama?" Ayeka broke in without a moment's delay. "To be this desired and get married—Ryoko-san is truly a lucky person. Why don't you congratulate her? Go on." "Ryoko..." Tenchi didn't know what to say.

Why had things progressed so suddenly? It was converging brilliantly toward a conclusion he had been avoiding... the conclusion that Ryoko would marry Seiran. Tenchi looked at Ryoko's pleading face, then at Seiran's face, which held an unyielding fighting spirit. Seiran's eyes seemed to say: *Prince, what can you say now?*

"Can you really make Ryoko happy?"

".....Ryoko." Tenchi could not bring himself to look at her face. There was only one thing he should have said—words of farewell. ".....Be happy."

"You're all talking like you own the place!" Suddenly, Ryoko stood up. Her clenched fists were trembling. "No one is even listening to how I feel! I'd rather die than marry this guy! I'll ram Ryo-Ohki right into the Galaxy Police

headquarters! Don't look down on me. I was the terror of the seven seas. Who in their right mind would marry—"

Seiran stood up and grabbed Ryoko’s shoulders. "Don't say things like 'die'!" He was dead serious. His fingers gently traced the scar on her face. "I’m sorry. I swear I will never hurt you again." "Seiran...?" His vibrant, ultramarine eyes looked straight down at her. Suddenly, old memories came rushing back.

Seiran standing on a marshland, his sand-colored hair whipped about by the wind. Seiran, calling to a winged, bird-like native creature with a low whistle. It was a planet with no intelligent life, no resource value—just a planet marked by a number. There was no one else there. At night, the sky was a canopy filled with stars, and the bridge would be bathed in starlight.

It was so beautiful it had scared her. Even though it was a sky she should have been used to, that was the first time she had ever felt afraid. She had grabbed Seiran’s hand and buried her face in his chest. Seiran’s hair smelled of water. Surrounded by nothing but water, green darkness, and starlight, they had closed their eyes, savoring the warmth of each other’s skin as if it were their last supper. She had never felt a sensation like that again...

"Ryoko." She was called back by Seiran’s voice. "I’ll say it again. Marry me." "Seiran..." She wanted to scream "No!", but something lodged in her throat. Tears welled up in Ryoko’s eyes and spilled down her cheeks. *Damn it, why am I crying at a time like this!* She cursed the tears that betrayed her heart and bit her lip, but the tears flowed like a broken faucet, refusing to stop. "You’re beautiful, Ryoko." Seiran pulled her into an embrace and gently wiped away her tears. Tenchi felt a sudden, sharp ache in his chest and quietly turned his face away. Even though he had just eaten, he felt as if his stomach had suddenly emptied.

"I haven't seen a wedding this unconventional since that one time," a foreign priest grumbled to his assistant. The Kourin religion’s caravan had docked alongside Ryo-Ohki, and the bridge had been set up with an altar—likely scavenged from the caravan’s chapel—along with white ribbons and large banners.

"So? Where are the bride and groom?" "Umm, they went off somewhere. I’m sure they’re just changing clothes," Mihoshi said, looking up from her schedule

notes. After the chaotic process of contacting the caravan, procuring a wedding dress, and—incredibly—negotiating the price, she added, "I've never done anything like this before!"

"Well, I'm sure it's a first for you," the silicon-based alien, who looked like a living crystal, said with a frown before whispering something to his assistant.

"Well, it's not particularly difficult," the young assistant in white robes said, lowering his voice. "We handle the proceedings. But I saw them earlier; the bride is quite nervous, with bandages and all. The groom, however, seemed overly enthusiastic." He leaned in closer. "Do they really want to get married? When I was in the choir, there was a case where the groom and his circle were far too eager, while the bride didn't say a word. When it came time for the vows, she suddenly pulled a laser rifle from under her dress! It turned out the whole ceremony was for revenge. It was a disaster—the groom collapsed, the fees weren't paid, and the bride ran off with one of the guests in a ship..."

Ayeka and Kiyone, who had been eavesdropping, exchanged glances. "Oh no, that's not the case at all!" Ayeka's voice cracked. "They truly love each other. Ryoko might be a bit high-strung, but by now she has accepted—" Kiyone kicked Ayeka's foot hard, and Ayeka swallowed the rest of her sentence.

"Listen. Those who follow the vows of the Kourin religion cannot divorce. Divine punishment will fall upon you. Are you sure you're okay with that?" The assistant looked at them suspiciously.

"Ah, they're here!" Ayeka stood up at the sound of Mihoshi's relieved voice. Seiran strode majestically to the front of the altar with his cape fluttering, then turned around. Ryoko walked slowly down the "virgin road" clutching Tenchi's arm, wearing a white dress so pure it made her look pale. The Tear of Neptune glittered at her collar. Tenchi, looking haggard, nearly stepped on her dress, while Ryoko was so stiff and pale she looked like a corpse that had just been unearthed after rigor mortis had set in.

"Wow, Ryoko-san... you look beautiful, don't you?" Mihoshi muttered in an uncertain tone. "Indeed... you look like a different person," Ayeka added, her voice equally out of sync.

The Kourin hymn rang out, and the priest looked down at the pair. "Ahem... Travelers of the universe," he began, in a tone that suggested he wanted to

finish this quickly and return to his canopy bed. "Place your hands on the scripture."

Seiran placed his hand on the softly glowing page and urged Ryoko to do the same. "Are you ready? Then... children born from the darkness. Fates destined to meet through the guidance of your souls. Do you swear your eternity here, in the past, and in the unseen beyond?" "I swear it," Seiran answered in a clear voice. "I swear it," came the curt addition.

The priest raised an eyebrow, but decided to leave them in the hands of the gods and hurried the process. "The vows are made. Now, the exchange of rings... an unusual exchange, to be sure."

Seiran looked at Tenchi with sharp eyes and muttered something. With a small sound, the seamless ring split. Seiran took it from Tenchi’s left wrist and placed it on Ryoko’s right wrist. It fused together seamlessly again, fitting perfectly.

The priest began to speak quickly, as if relieved. "Very well. Love is the light that illuminates the void. Light is the immutable truth. Light born from darkness, here you meet and become one."

Seiran smiled for the first time. "Ryoko!" He reached out to pull her close. That was when it happened.

"Sorry, Seiran!!" With a ringing voice, Ryoko spun around and grabbed Tenchi’s hand. In the next instant, both of their figures vanished from the bridge without a trace. The ring clattered onto the floor.

"Ryoko!?" "Tenchi-sama!!" The shouts went up simultaneously. Ayeka rushed to the altar in a frenzy, shoving aside the stunned Seiran, and looked around like a child who had seen a magic trick for the first time. Then, she turned paper-white. "Ayeka-san!" Kiyone’s dash was a split second too late. Ayeka collapsed like a stick, and Mihoshi squeezed her eyes shut.

"What in the world just happened!?" The priest was clinging to the altar with his claws, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. "Myaaaaaaaan!!" A piercing, mournful cry echoed. The crystals swirled as if coming back to life, and the vision blurred. "Ryo... Oh... Ki!?" Mihoshi opened her eyes. The world was spinning, and Azaka and Kamidake were sliding across the floor as the ship tilted.

Chapter 7:

Meanwhile, Sasami and Washu were...

Meanwhile, Sasami and Washu were docked at a giant donut-shaped convenience station, playing as if to make up for all the boredom they had endured until now. Back on the shuttle, Yukinojo was playing the role of house-sitter and communications officer, waiting for Mihoshi’s call without sleep or rest.

"Convenience station" was just a nickname—it wasn't one of those shops that sprouted overnight from underground stems. But the concept wasn't far off. Scattered along the major trade routes, these stations carried everything from essentials for space travel to things no one needed. They functioned as comprehensive service stations, including restaurants, groceries, daily goods, repair parts, and arcades. Sasami and Washu had spent the time exploring every corner of the vast station, laughing at mysterious spray cans and snacks that looked completely inedible.

Even in the middle of space, there was a shop that any Earthling would find comfort in—a fast-food chain that some joked would eventually reproduce by spores and homogenize the world’s diet. The moment they entered, a familiar voice called out, "Welcome!"

"What would you like?" Sasami looked around the shop, scanned the menu, and pointed. "Hamburgers and shakes." "Would you like fries with that?" "Oh, no fries. Coffee and an apple pie, too," Washu added, eyeing the clerk, who was smiling as if he were the happiest robot in the universe.

"Will you be paying by card or real money?" The robot smiled while pushing the tray forward. Washu presented a card with the Galaxy Police emblem. "With this, please." The robot took it, inserted it into the register, and then bowed forty-five degrees. "That will be all. Thank you very much, please enjoy your meal."

"It might be none of my business," Washu said as she lifted the heavy tray, "but you have a loose screw." The robot looked around the counter while smiling,

picked up a screw that had rolled away, and fitted it back into the base of its neck. "Thank you for your kindness. It falls out often." The robot waved cheerily and saw them off.

Crossing the red-and-white checkered floor, Washu looked around the shop with deep emotion. "It’s gotten much cleaner than when I was a student."

Sasami and Washu settled into empty seats and began to eat. Washu sipped her coffee with a distant look, while Sasami wondered whether it would be polite to ask about Washu’s student days or not, watching the bustling crowd of people from various star systems.

"It doesn't really look that different from shops on Earth," Sasami said. "True, there are a lot of humanoids," Washu replied simply, seemingly in no mood for nostalgia. "I wonder what happened to Tenchi-nii-chan and the others?" Sasami clutched her straw, looking a bit down. "Hey, there hasn't been any contact yet, right?" "If there’s contact, Yukinojo should be able to transfer it to us," Washu said, dangling one of her earrings. An identical one swayed on Sasami’s ear.

Truth be told, Sasami was incredibly lonely. Washu was kind, and Yukinojo had even tried to tell bad jokes to cheer her up. But the fact remained that they had been abandoned without a word. "Washu-chan, I want to drink something warm. Maybe cocoa." "Hmm? Cocoa? I’ll go buy some." "Oh, no, it's okay. I’ll go buy it myself." Sasami stopped Washu and took the Galaxy Police card. "By the way, is it okay to use this? It’s Mihoshi-san’s, right?" "It should be fine. It’s the fault of whoever left it behind. Use it as much as you want. It’ll surely be written off as an expense."

Sasami didn't quite understand what "written off" meant, but she decided to let her "sister" pay her back later and headed to the counter.

That was when it happened. Two people in masks and sunglasses burst through the entrance. "Hands up!!" They were wielding large heat guns. A tall man with pointed ears jammed his gun at the woman at the register, while another burly man aimed at the customers. "Don't move!" An orange line of fire swept over the customers’ heads, causing loud shrieks. "Put the money in this bag. Hurry up!" "Ehh... wh-what should I do..."

While every other customer in the shop flattened themselves on the floor or crawled under tables, Sasami had been left standing in front of the counter. "W-Washu-chaaan..." At that voice, the man with pointed ears turned around.

"What's this brat?" He grabbed Sasami by the neck and hauled her up. "Kyaaa!" "Hurry up! Do you care what happens to this kid!?"

The man held Sasami hostage, snatched the bag, and tossed it to his partner. "Sasami-chan!" Washu tried to jump out from under the table, but a heat gun shot grazed her side. "I told you not to move!" "This kid's life is over if you do!"

The two robbers backed away while keeping their guns aimed, then turned on their heels and ran for the entrance. Or so they thought. "Wah!?" "Chris!?" The man with pointed ears, called Chris, tripped on a metal bar and face-planted onto the floor. The other man tripped over his partner and fell on top of him.

"Customers, please, no playing at robbery in the shop." A metallic hand reached out and quickly snatched away their heat guns. It was the robot from the counter. It skillfully pinned the robbers' knees and necks. "Officer, I leave the rest to you," the robot said, signaling to Washu, who had rushed out. "M-me?" *Damn it. Because I used Mihoshi's card, they think I'm a detective.*

"Washu-chan!!" Sasami, who had been huddled on the floor, ran over with tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Sasami-chan." Washu hugged Sasami and whispered to the robot, "I'm currently on vacation. If possible, I'd like you to handle it."

The robot tilted its head but, in reply, grabbed the two robbers by their collars and hoisted them up like a crane. "Oh, it hurts. My neck's gonna snap," the pointed-ear one cried. It seemed they had lost the will to resist. They were just small-time convenience store robbers, after all.

The robot lowered them. "I will accept complaints at the security office. Now, please move along." "Where are the robbers!?" Finally, the uniformed security guards arrived.

The robot handed the pair—and the heat guns—over to the guards and brushed its hands off. "Customers, I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience. It is fine now. We will provide free coffee, so please take your time." The robot spread its hands like an actor and smiled. But by then, most of the customers had already started to prepare to leave.

The robot shrugged and turned back toward the counter. "Thank you, you saved us," Washu called out to its back. "Umm... thank you so much," Sasami added

shyly. The robot turned around. "Little lady, that must have been frightening. If you'd like, I'll bring you some cocoa."

It placed a hand gently on Sasami's head, then hurried behind the counter and returned with a tray carrying two steaming cups. "Umm..." "My name is George. Please, have a seat."

Sasami looked closely at the robot that had saved her for the first time. It was about 190 centimeters tall, with a well-proportioned body in a red-and-white striped shop uniform, and a beautiful metallic sheen on its surface. Its face was made of simplified parts, but it seemed to have a wide variety of expression patterns. It didn't feel unnatural.

"I'm Sasami. Are you a robot? An Android?" The robot, George, stood politely by the table and nodded as if to say, *I am aware*. "I heard earlier. Sasami-chan and Washu-san, right? I am a 'freeter robot'." Sasami tilted her head, so George added, "This is what we call those of us who travel the universe doing part-time jobs after our initial contracts expire. There are quite a lot of us these days. After all, there are no wars."

George turned to Washu and pulled a small screw from the side of its neck. "You noticed this screw earlier. You seem to be a very observant and sincere person. Would you be interested in hiring me?"

Washu's eyes widened in surprise at the abrupt offer. "Do you always scout for employers like that?" George smiled and fitted the screw back in. "Not at all. This is one of the methods for creating a good encounter. I am a rather high-end robot. I can work as a bodyguard for a reasonable fee, or I can serve as a companion for this young lady. Basically, I can handle any job that does not violate the Three Laws. I was made as a general-purpose personal robot to be capable of demonstrating sufficient personality and performance. I would be happy to share my background later, if you wish."

Washu realized that the world had changed quite a bit while she had been sleeping within the *Souja. A freeter robot!* So, while she hadn't been looking, androids who had lost their jobs, wild robots, and hitchhikers had all been wandering the universe. Washu stared at George with a keen, scientist's eye, but suddenly found herself interested in this plucky machine. It was a hunch that this guy would be useful.

"Fine. I'll hire you. But I assume you can't leave immediately?" "I am currently speaking with you in the capacity of caring for customers who have encountered an accident," George replied. "In that case, I will go settle things with the manager. I imagine my salary for this term will be forfeited."

George disappeared behind the door at the back of the counter with a steady gait. "Hey, hey, are you going to hire him?" As soon as George was out of sight, Sasami leaned forward. "He seems super smart. Sasami has never seen a robot like that before. He's like an adult!"

Sasami's eyes were shining with excitement, and she seemed to have completely forgotten the shock of the robbery. Washu felt a pang of conscience for having let Sasami get into such a situation, despite it being unavoidable, so she felt relieved. With Mihoshi's card, she could surely cover the costs.

"Yeah. I don't know when we'll meet up with Tenchi-nii-chan and Ryoko-tachi who left on their own, and I can't say we won't run into situations like this wherever we go. Unfortunately, I'm not really cut out for action, and I can't rely on Yukinojo for everything. He might do it if I asked, though—like taking out convenience store robbers using full anti-spaceship weaponry."

Washu didn't say it aloud, but she had decided to hire George mainly because she thought he would be a good companion for Sasami.

Sasami, after all, was still only nine years old. Normally, as a princess of the Juraian Royal Family—or simply as a minor—she should have been leading a settled life under proper protection. Back at the Masaki house, there were Yosho and Nobuyuki, providing at least some semblance of family life. But the moment she stepped into space, this was the result.

After being tossed about by the impulsive actions of her older sisters, she had been left behind. No matter how sensible Sasami was, this was far too irresponsible. And to think she had only come along because she was worried about Tenchi, Ayeka, and Mihoshi and Kiyone.

"…Honestly, those kids!" Ignoring the fact that she herself had raised a girl named Ryoko by leaving her to her own devices, Washu spat out the words.

"Eh!?" Sasami's eyes went wide. "No, nothing. Just talking to myself," Washu said, waving her hand dismissively with a laugh. "Oh… I see."

Sasami’s gaze fell to the cocoa in her cup, which had gone cold with half still remaining. Her eyes clouded over. "Washu-chan, I…" She looked sad. "I was scared. No, it’s not your fault, Washu-chan. I’m sorry. I was just thinking… maybe I shouldn't have come after all. I mean, I’m not any help at all…"

"That’s not true," Washu replied reflexively, but Sasami shook her head. "No, Sasami can't do anything. I can't be as strong as you, Onee-sama." Her light blue hair swayed. "I want to see Ryo-chan. I want to see Tenchi-nii-chan. Maybe they’ve already forgotten all about me."

"Sasami-chan!" Washu was at a loss for words. With no other choice, she reached out and stroked Sasami’s lustrous hair. "Your sisters are just like that, you know. You don't have to be down, Sasami-chan. Hey, what do you think would have happened to the Masaki house if you weren't there? Everyone would be lost by now. I’ve told you before, right? That you’re the most sensible one of them all. It’s okay. You don't have to worry about anything. I’ll do everything for you. After all, I’m the greatest genius in the universe."

Sasami lifted her face with determination. "Is that right, Washu-chan? Everyone says the same thing. 'Sasami-chan is so sensible, such a hard worker.' But I’m not everyone’s mother! I’m not cooking anymore! I’m not doing laundry or cleaning anymore! I’m going to play just like my sisters. No, I’m going to study really, really hard and become a genius scientist just like you!"

"Eh!?" "And then, I’ll inherit the Juraian Royal Family and marry Tenchi-nii-chan!" "Eeeeh!?" "By then, Sasami won't be a freckled little shrimp anymore! My chest will be huge like Ryoko-onee-chan's, and I’ll be a beauty who looks great in high heels like Kiyone-onee-chan!"

"Now, now…" But Sasami’s eyes were serious. Even at just nine years old, her small body was brimming with pride and the determination of a princess. She was certainly Ayeka’s sister, that was for sure.

That’s right, Sasami-chan. The love, peace, and future of the entire universe belong to you! Just as Washu was about to break into applause…

Clap, clap, clap…

Applause actually rained down from above. "George!" When had he returned? George, now dressed in a soft brown suit, was smiling down at Sasami.

"Ah, George-san… were you listening?" Sasami blushed, as expected. "You are welcome to just call me George," the silver robot said. George bowed and took Sasami's hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Princess Sasami. So, this lovely young lady was a princess of the Juraian Royal Family. It is fortunate the robbers did not know that."

As he whispered, he placed something glittering in Sasami's hand. It was a pendant with a silver chain. "Wow…" As Sasami lifted the chain, the pendant head, shaped like a particle model, rotated and sparkled. "A token of our acquaintance."

George handed an ID card to Washu. "My background is recorded there. Please feel free to view it at the service counter." Washu stared intently at the rainbow-colored ID card for a moment, then handed it back to George. "Later is fine. Just come to the ship for now. We can talk there." "I understand. Very well."

George went to return the tray, and when he returned, he carried their luggage and shopping bags, walking out of the shop ahead of them. "Ah, you don't have to do that. I'll carry them," Sasami said. Washu and Sasami followed George out of the shop, never noticing the woman in the black bodysuit who was casting a sharp gaze at Sasami's retreating figure.

The counter at the docking port was crowded, seemingly due to some kind of trouble. Washu was waiting in line irritably among various aliens, while Sasami, having nothing to do, sat on a sofa and surveyed the wide floor.

"I wonder how much longer," Sasami said. Looking up at George, who was standing by instead of sitting, she suddenly remembered the pendant and searched her pockets. "Huh?" She was sure she had put it away. Sasami searched her other pockets and peered into her bag—finding only tissues, a handkerchief, and candy—before jumping up, pale with panic.

"Oh no! I left it on the table back there! Wait here, please. I'll go get it!" "Is something wrong?" George immediately asked. "That beautiful pendant. I left it behind at the shop." "I shall go search for it."

Sasami turned back, but shook her head. "No. I'll be right back. Besides, someone has to watch the luggage, right?" Before George could stop her, Sasami

had already run off. George, having just picked up the luggage, hesitated for a moment, wondering what to do. He should go.

Just as he reached that decision, he heard Washu calling him. "George. Can you come here for a second?" Her voice sounded desperate.

George had no choice but to take the luggage to the line, where Washu beckoned him over and whispered rapidly, "Sorry, but I really need to use the restroom. Can you wait in line for me? When our turn comes, just pay the fee and get the receipt."

Having said that, Washu quickly left the line and headed down the elevator. *Regrettable, but there is no choice but to wait in line.* George decided that the best thing he could do was wait his turn here, and rearranged the luggage to make it easier to hold.

When Sasami arrived at the fast-food shop, other customers were sitting at the table. It was a pair of aliens covered in blue scales. Sasami was a little intimidated, but spoke politely in the common tongue. "Um, excuse me for bothering you. Was there a small pendant dropped here?"

The alien couple looked at Sasami simultaneously, then looked under the table simultaneously. "No. There was nothing there when we arrived." "Did you try asking at the counter?" Sasami thanked them and ran to the counter, asking the female clerk. The answer was that no such item had been turned in. Sasami left the shop disappointed, but turned back, unable to give up. *Someone must have taken it. It was such a beautiful pendant.*

"Are you in some kind of trouble, little girl?" A soft alto voice spoke. Sasami turned around in surprise to see a beautiful blonde woman in a black jumpsuit.

"Um…" Sasami whispered in a small voice, feeling somewhat overwhelmed. "I lost my pendant. It was a gift, and it’s very important to me." The blonde woman narrowed her eyes with concern. "What kind of pendant is it? Things that are forgotten or lost might have been turned in at the service counter. Would you like me to go with you?"

She was a stranger. After just having had a frightening encounter, the correct thing to do was to politely decline anyone who approached her as if they had been waiting for her. But Sasami could only think about that beautiful pendant.

"This way." The woman took Sasami's hand and started walking with long strides; Sasami had no choice but to trot along to keep up. As they walked through the crowds in the corridors lined with various shops, Sasami lost her sense of direction.

"Onee-san?" "Yes?" "Is the service counter far? I told them I'd be right back." The woman smiled—a smile that would have left most men weak at the knees—and shook her head. "It's almost there." "'Almost there'—about how much longer?"

Sasami looked around and gasped in surprise when she spotted the back of a head that should have been waiting in line at the docking port counter. "Washu-chan!!" Washu, who had been stopping by a parts shop, turned around, startled. "Sasami-chan!? What happened? And who is that person?"

Before she could even hear the *tsk* of a tongue-click, Sasami was swept up by both arms and was already running with the blonde woman. "Hey, let go! I'm calling the—" The woman's hand covered Sasami's mouth, and a red high heel kicked open a door marked *STAFF ONLY*. They dove inside, and the woman elbowed the switch for a transport chute.

"Hold on tight!" Right before Washu's eyes, the black chute opened its mouth, and the woman's blonde hair and Sasami's light blue hair vanished. "Sasami-chan!!"

It was a high-speed chute. The two of them were already gone, without a trace. "…Damn it…" Even the greatest genius scientist in the universe could do nothing about this. Washu turned on her heel and sprinted out of the warehouse.

I should have looked at the station map. Washu's expression turned grim. That woman was a professional. She must have been eavesdropping on their conversation, waiting for an opportunity to kidnap her. Washu scrambled up the elevator, her mind racing.

In any case, I cannot let her take them off this station. I have to sound the alarm and lock down the ports.

Suddenly, a cool sound rang in her ear. It was the signal for an Ansible communication. When Washu touched her earring, Mihoshi's voice suddenly burst through.

"This is Mihoshi. Yukinojo, can you hear me? Come save us right now! It’s a disaster! Ryo-Ohki left us behind and went off somewhere!!" "Eh!? What did you say!?" Washu screamed back reflexively. "This is not the time for that! If you’re communicating, it means you’re in a place where you can communicate, right? Do it later!!" "Washu-san?"

Washu switched it off, driving out Mihoshi’s bewildered voice, and shoved aside a slow-moving customer as she slid onto the floor.

Chapter 8:

What About the Young Lady!?

"What about the young lady!?"

George, who had been waiting near the counter after finishing the paperwork, rushed over upon seeing the look of terror on Washu's face.

"My companion has been kidnapped! It's a girl! Close the station immediately!!"

Washu screamed at the reception desk, shoved past the other customers, and left the receptionist dumbstruck.

"Hurry! The kidnapper jumped into a transport chute. Give me the station's blueprint!"

"I must contact the Galaxy Police…" the receptionist stammered, flustered.

"Just give me the blueprint!"

Startled by Washu's intensity, the receptionist operated the panel. The counter's guide map switched to a 3D layout.

"Near the parts shop. Yes, that's it."

The transport chute led directly to an exterior airlock. There was no doubt the kidnapper knew exactly how the station was laid out. As Washu stood speechless, George, who had been peering at the map next to her, said quietly, "Let's go, Washu-san. Whoever snatched that child, they are a professional. They aren't here anymore."

Washu snapped out of it. *What am I panicking for? I'm the greatest genius scientist in the universe. Thinking of relying on the Galaxy Police… what a foolish idea.*

Washu reached out and switched off the panel. "Sorry for yelling. It seems there’s no need to trouble you any further. Don't contact the Galaxy Police. If I decide it’s necessary, I’ll do it myself. Thanks for your help."

Ignoring the bewildered receptionist, Washu and George walked out of the floor.

Meanwhile, Mihoshi, whose Ansible connection had been unilaterally cut, was at a loss inside the missionary caravan.

"She cut me off…"

"What? What happened!?" Kiyone, who had been tending to Ayeka lying on a bench, turned around.

"She said she didn't have time for this. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen Washu-san that panicked. I wonder what on earth happened?"

"Weren't you calling Yukinojo? Just try contacting her again."

"Eh? Ah, you’re right."

Mihoshi nodded apologetically to the man in white robes—Lee—and began calling her shuttle again.

"How is she?" A middle-aged nun in gray robes peered at Ayeka’s face.

"She still hasn't regained consciousness… It seems the shock was too much," Kiyone replied, never taking her eyes off Ayeka.

It’s been like this since then… since Tenchi and Ryoko vanished and Ayeka collapsed.

None of them knew what to do. They only knew that Ryoko had performed a scramble-warp with Tenchi. But where to? They had no clue. Kiyone and the guardians had their hands full with Ayeka, Mihoshi with Seiran, and the caravan crew with the priest; there had been no time to search for the two.

But Ryo-Ohki was different. The moment Mihoshi handcuffed Seiran, the lower crystal suddenly rose and began to swirl. Ryo-Ohki screamed, and light raced between the crystals.

"Ryo-Ohki-chan! What’s wrong!?" Mihoshi yelled in surprise.

"Myaaaaaaaan!" Ryo-Ohki answered with an angry cry.

It took two seconds to realize that wasn't a normal sound. It was too late. By then, the floor was undulating, the crystals were glowing, and they had all tumbled into the center of the bridge, which had become like a funnel.

"Myaaaaaaaan!!"

They had no idea what was happening. Kiyone clung to Ayeka, Mihoshi to Seiran, the man in white to the priest, and the choir members to each other. Then, the floor vanished. Simultaneously, the crystals and the screens disappeared. They were cast out into the middle of space—specifically, right next to the missionary caravan. They witnessed Ryo-Ohki glow for an instant and vanish after ejecting them.

Everything after that was even more chaotic. Ayeka had nearly drifted away as space debris, but miraculously, Mihoshi’s hand had caught her hair. Kiyone had clung to a nearby black boot while grabbing the hood of a white robe that flowed past her.

Then, a golden beam, as bright as heavenly light, enveloped them. It was the missionary caravan’s tractor beam. They had tumbled inside the airlock without a single casualty. *If we get a reward for life-saving, saving the First Princess of Jurai should mean they’ll build a Kourin Church on Jurai…* And so, they were continuing their duties.

Yes, the boot I clung to was Seiran’s.

Kiyone sighed and looked around the caravan’s meeting room. Seiran was sitting on a bench, flanked by guardians, with a nun standing on the opposite side. Despite everything that had happened, the believers were kind. Instead of a barrage of questions, Ayeka was given a blanket, and they were served hot drinks. Most gratefully, despite the many believers coming and going, no one bothered them.

Working with Mihoshi meant encountering incredible misfortune, but also incredible luck. Mihoshi was still glued to the Ansible, apparently unable to get through.

"The line is blocked," Mihoshi said, turning around. "We're too far for a bracelet link-up. There really must be something terrible happening."

Suddenly, the Ansible connected.

"Yukinojo!? Is that you, Yukinojo? What on earth happened!?"

"Mihoshi-dono!! It's a disaster!"

Yukinojo's nostalgic face appeared on the monitor. "Washu-dono just returned, and I've heard the situation. Sasami-dono… Sasami-dono has been kidnapped by female space pirates!"

"Eeeh!?"

The monitor switched abruptly, and Washu's face appeared in close-up.

"That's how it is. We're tracking the pirates now. It wasn't in Yukinojo's data, so I'm sending you a composite photo—I need any information you can find, no matter how small. What is this missionary caravan? Are you all safe, for now?"

"It's me, Mihoshi, Ayeka-san, and Seiran. What do you mean Sasami-chan was kidnapped?"

As Kiyone interrupted, Washu was forced to repeat the situation.

"So, where on earth are Tenchi-dono and Ryoko? Explain it concisely, and be brief."

Seeing Washu's irritable face, Mihoshi pushed Kiyone in front of the monitor. While Kiyone gave a concise, brief explanation, Washu listened in stony silence. Unable to contain herself, she cut Kiyone off.

"Honestly, I'm sick of how dim-witted you all are! If Tenchi-dono was taken hostage, why didn't you take Ryoko hostage? You should have been able to think of that kind of trade! You're all a bunch of blockheads! You're lucky you weren't blown away by a pirate ring."

Seeing Kiyone turn pale and bite her lip, Washu seemed to realize she'd gone too far and softened her tone slightly. "There's nothing you can do about Tenchi-dono and Ryoko. Since Ryo-Ohki flew off, it means the astral link has recovered or it found a lead, so leave that to them. Also, I'm sure you

understand, don't tell Ayeka-san. You'll have to handle the rest yourselves. Got it?"

"Wait!!" a raspy voice cried from behind Kiyone. "Something happened to her… to Sasami, didn't it! Where is Sasami? Bring Sasami out!!"

It was Ayeka. Washu watched with pursed lips as a pale Ayeka pushed Kiyone aside with unsteady steps and collapsed in front of the Ansible.

"Washu-san!"

Washu stared at Ayeka for a full ten seconds without a word. "How are you feeling, Ayeka-san?"

"I am fine. Sasami is…"

Washu raised a hand to stop her and smiled. "Tell Kiyone-dono. I am the greatest genius scientist in the universe. The word 'impossible' does not exist in my dictionary."

The monitor went dark, and a moment later, a composite photo was spat out. A beautiful blonde woman with dark eyes in a black jumpsuit was smiling.

"Who? Who is this woman?" Ayeka held the photo in one hand and looked around. "Where am I? What about Ryo-Ohki!?"

"Ayeka-sama!!" Azaka and Kamidake rushed over in a panic. "You should still be resting…"

"We are in the missionary caravan. We were rescued after Ryo-Ohki ejected us…"

"Why am I in a place like this!? We must get Tenchi-sama and Sasami back right now! And execute that pirate!!"

She wasn't listening to the guardians at all.

"Ayeka-san!?"

"But Ryo-Ohki has disappeared…"

Kiyone and Mihoshi’s words didn't reach her either. All that occupied Ayeka’s mind was the fact that Tenchi was gone, and the fact that Sasami had likely been kidnapped.

"Bring out a ship! Right now! Search the entire universe! Azaka, Kamidake, what are you dawdling for!"

Kiyone and Mihoshi exchanged glances. It seemed Ayeka saw nothing.

"Wh-what should we do, Kiyone? Ayeka-san…"

"Could it be…"

This was the worst possible situation. Tenchi and Ryoko were missing, Sasami had been kidnapped, the shuttle had been hijacked by Washu, and they couldn't go anywhere. If Ayeka lost her mind on top of this…

"Shut up!!"

The situation was saved by a man’s roar.

"I’m done with women screaming! If you want to scream, go do it somewhere else!"

Ayeka’s eyes locked onto the man in handcuffs. In an instant, focus returned to her eyes, and her memories came rushing back like a torrent.

"Pirate!!" Ayeka’s hand grabbed Seiran by the collar. "Seiran! Because of you, Tenchi-sama is… Return Tenchi-sama to me! Right now!"

Seiran tore Ayeka’s hand away with his right hand. "Then return my Ryoko! Right now! If you can do it, try it!!"

"How dare you, pirate! I’ll have you executed!"

"And what are you!? You’re just a princess who can do nothing but scream and give orders!"

Ayeka was struck dumb. Even the believers in the room and the nun who had been tending to Ayeka fell silent.

"Since you're not talking back, it doesn't seem like you've lost your mind," Seiran said. He stood up and snatched the photo Ayeka had been holding. He winced in pain, perhaps having twisted his wrist.

"You two detectives! I don't care which one, get these handcuffs off. If you don't want to take them off, shoot me! What do you expect me to do, locked in here? My left hand is useless. Are you telling me to go to the restroom in this state!?"

"Do not take them off! He is a murderer! I will never forgive him!" Ayeka screamed, looking like she wouldn't budge an inch.

"Ayeka-san!" Mihoshi rushed over, ignoring Seiran, and instinctively grasped Ayeka's hands. "I'm so relieved. I was worried what would happen if you lost your mind, too. Please, keep your head clear, okay?"

"What? Was I really acting that strange?" Ayeka asked, looking embarrassed. *Because that was all I could think about,* she added in her heart.

"Oh, definitely," Mihoshi's eyes welled up. "Though I can't blame you. First it was Tenchi-san, then Ryo-Ohki, and now this? I want to cry too. But we can't, right? We're detectives of the Galaxy Police."

"Mihoshi!" Kiyone shook her shoulders. "Don't you start crying! If you cry, I'll report you for dereliction of duty! I want to cry too! The ship is far away, Washu-san won't listen to a word anyone says, so what on earth are we supposed to do!?"

"Kiyone…" Large tears rolled down Mihoshi's cheeks. "I want to go back to Earth. If we were in Okayama, none of this would have happened. We didn't do anything wrong, so why is this happening to us!?"

"How should I know! It's all because we got separated in the first place! We never should have left each other. If we had stayed in one place, whatever happened would have been contained there, but because we split up, our misfortune got scattered too!"

"But we are safe and alive. As for Tenchi-sama and Sasami…"

Mihoshi and Kiyone hugged each other and started crying, and Ayeka joined them. Seiran stood ignored, staring at the three women sobbing uncontrollably.

What are these people!? They were completely different from how they were on Ryo-Ohki's bridge.

If I don't think of a way to sneak out, am I going to end up taking care of these people forever!?

Seiran imagined Ryoko in her wedding dress, as he had last seen her. A feeling of nothingness returned, threatening to crumble the floor beneath his feet.

Ryoko! Ryoko! Where are you now!?

He had thought he would forgive her for everything if she would just return to his hand. He had wanted to make her the happiest woman in the universe. *Have I driven you that far into a corner?*

Seiran tried to run his hand through his hair in desperation, only to realize he was still holding the photo he'd snatched from Ayeka.

"Shut up!! If you have time to cry, do something about these handcuffs!"

Seiran's voice was completely ignored.

Damn it…!! He was so angry he felt like destroying the ship along with the three women. He didn't have time to be dealing with them.

I must find Ryoko. No matter how many years it takes, I must find her. Seiran started to throw away the composite photo, but suddenly his eyes caught the face of the woman in the picture. It was a face he had met years ago. At some bar. That's right… it was Lamed. She wasn't a pirate. At least, not back then.

Seiran thrust the composite photo right in front of Ayeka's nose. "Don't you want to hear what this woman has to say?" The sobbing of the three women stopped instantly. "You know who this is!?" Seiran quickly pulled the photo back. "Not until you take these off."

Meanwhile, Ryo-Ohki was aimlessly wandering through space alone. For a split second, the astral link it had detected had been severed. "Myaaaaaaaan…" The astral link, which had existed since the first time they flew through space together, always glowed with a feeling like a gentle warmth right around the

jewel on its forehead. Ryo-Ohki wanted to tell her: *Seiran isn't here. Ayeka isn't here. No one is riding me right now. Ryo-Ohki is right here. I'm coming to pick you up, so please call for Ryo-Ohki.* The jewel was working actively because it had expanded its search range, but its center remained cold. *Ryoko doesn't want to be found by Ryo-Ohki,* Ryo-Ohki thought. *That's why she cut the astral link and suppressed the jewel's activity.*

Even so, Ryo-Ohki didn't give up like a human would. Believing she would surely be found, it drifted through the sea of darkness, thinking only of Ryoko. It also thought of Tenchi, who was with her. Ryo-Ohki kept calling out, and those thoughts reached the ears of one who sees all and hears all.

A small bubble drifted through the dark ocean like a transparent water flea. Inside, a single boy was sleeping. Ryoko was nowhere to be found. The translucent bubble looked unreliable, as if it might pop and vanish at any moment. The flame of the boy's life was burning brightly and steadily, but his consciousness was locked away in a white darkness.

One of the oldest spirits, the Queen of the Night—no, the one known as Tsukuyomi—watched it through the eyes of The One Who Watches All. "Ain," Tsukuyomi's lustrous voice called the name. "The young prince has returned to me." "Yes, Lady Tsukuyomi." A giant rose petal curled up, slowly sucked in the bubble, and closed.

[Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki] Tenchi-sama's gone mad!? (Part 1) [End]

Afterword

This is already the fourth book I've spent with Tenchi-kun and his all-stars. The TV version of Tenchi-kun is in top form… being bullied—no, no, being "loved" by the strongest female team in the galaxy. He's completely become the Masaki family's toy, hasn't he? Or rather, the Masaki family's chipmunk… or maybe not. By the way, Ryoko is the Masaki family's parasitic beast, Sasami is the Masaki family's Chibiusa, Ayeka is the Masaki family's Naga, and Washu-chan is, needless to say, Doraemon. Sorry! I don't mean anything by it.

As this was my first time doing a serial, I got very carried away. It's like a horse that has only ever run a mile suddenly challenging the Spring Tenno Sho (the Emperor's Cup)—it can only be described as reckless. Thanks to my veteran jockey (or should I say, trainer?), I managed to run through the first half somehow, but who knows what will happen in the second half. Yes, that's right. This story began solely with the thought: I want to let Tenchi-kun—who is always smiling, never forgets his manners, keeps his cool, and is indecisive and kind to girls—lose his mind to the fullest extent just once. Right now, he's just worrying about everyone else because those around him are losing their minds, but he'll snap someday… he'll snap… in the second half, it's total Armageddon! …Sorry, I'm getting a bit carried away. As an author with poor stamina, I have to whip myself up like this to keep running.

Tenchi-kun, who easily threw away the academic society and single-handedly took on a life of being plagued by women; Nobuyuki-oto-san, who waves the flag and cheers him on; and Katsuhito-san, who casually throws his beloved grandson into the abyss. Only with the support of these people has Tenchi-kun finally started to walk.

He lacks the resolve to take on love, and his experience points are too low to walk alone. But he's a boy, so I want him to do his best. A colorless, transparent protagonist; a harmless boy in heartwarming pastel colors. If he stays like that, he'll forever be nothing more than the garnish for the sashimi of those star-like girls—at most, just furikake on their rice. Well, he might be thinking that's the best way to live, though.

Oh, one word about the new characters who are making an already crowded story even more confusing. First, Seiran, who was supposed to be a much cooler character than Tenchi-kun. He’s becoming nothing but a dangerous person. Thinking back, the late Kagato-san was cool, wasn't he? The Queen of the Night, Tsukuyomi. If she were sushi, she’d be fatty tuna; if she were eel, she’d be top-grade. Just imagining her makes me drool. Is she obsessed with Tenchi just because she likes eating the "first catch"? We shall see.

I’d like to thank Take-san, who steered me through this run with exquisite rein-handling, and all the readers who supported me. (Sorry I can't write replies!) I hope to run to the finish line without stumbling. May the light of love and hope break through the clouds and shine down upon all of you from far, far away in space.

In Tokyo, in the midst of the Spring G1 race season. Naoko Hasegawa

Postscript Sorry for the sudden influx of horse racing terminology. I just started. And yet, my daughter keeps guessing the winners perfectly! I’m mostly just making predictions and haven't actually gone to buy many tickets. Even so, on Sunday afternoons, I forget everything and get glued to the TV.

First published in Monthly Dragon Magazine, November 1994 – June 1995.